



NOVEL

5

WRITTEN BY
Touya

ILLUSTRATED BY
chibi

A Tale of the
**Secret
Saint**





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Seven Seas Entertainment

Tensei Sita Daiseijyo ha, Seijyo dearuko towohitakakusu Vol.5

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Originally published in Japan in 2021

by EARTH STAR Entertainment, Tokyo.

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through TOHAN CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold

PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-761-3

Printed in Canada

First Printing: December 2023

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Story Thus Far

FIA, ONCE THE GREAT SAINT in her past life, now hides her saintly powers and leads a new life as an ordinary knight—albeit a life fraught with its own challenges. But despite her best efforts, she has failed to completely hide her true capabilities and drawn the attention of many knights and captains.

She joins Captain Cyril on a trip to his territory, Sutherland, a place where faith in the Great Saint runs deep. After an unforeseeable surprise, she is recognized as the Great Saint's reincarnation.

A misunderstanding leaves Captain Kurtis injured, and he suddenly remembers that he was the Great Saint's personal knight three hundred years ago in his previous life. Full of regret over failing to protect her in the past, he announces he'll follow Fia out of Sutherland and to the Royal Capital.

After ending tensions between the Sutherland people and the knights, Fia is given a farewell as she makes her journey back to the Royal Capital with Captain Cyril, Captain Kurtis, and the rest.

Náv Kingdom

CHARACTER LIST



FIA RUUD

Youngest daughter of the Ruud knight family. A princess and the Great Saint in her past life. Currently hiding the fact that she is a saint and living as a knight...or trying to, at least.



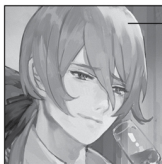
ZAVILIA

Fia's familiar. The only black dragon in the world. One of the Three Great Beasts of the continent.



SAVIZ NÁV

Commander of the Náv Black Dragon Knights. The younger brother of the king and, as such, the heir apparent.



CYRIL SUTHERLAND

Captain of the First Knight Brigade. Head of the most prominent duke family and second in line to the throne. Also known as the "Dragon of Náv." Knight Brigade's strongest swordsman.



KURTIS BANNISTER

Captain of the Thirteenth Knight Brigade. Former knight of the First Knight Brigade. Canopus, the Blue Knight, in his past life.



RED, GREEN, AND BLUE

Emperor of the Arteaga Empire and his two younger brothers.

300 Years Ago



SERAFINA NÁV

Fia's past life. Second princess of the Náv Kingdom. World's only Great Saint.



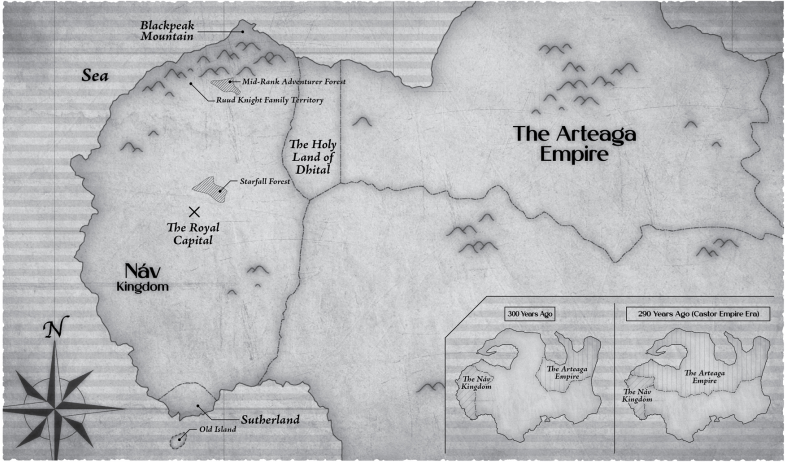
SIRIUS ULYSSES

Said to be the strongest knight in the Kingdom of his time. Captain of the Royal Guard. A handsome man with gray hair and silver eyes.

Náv Black Dragon Knight Brigade

COMMANDER: SAVIZ NÁV

	Captain	Vice-Captain	Knight
First Knight Brigade ROYAL FAMILY GUARDS	Cyril Sutherland		Fia Ruud, Fabian Wyner
Second Knight Brigade ROYAL CASTLE SECURITY	Desmond Ronan		
Third Mage Knight Brigade MAGES	Enoch		
Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade MONSTER TAMERS	Quentin Agutter	Gideon Oakes	Party
Fifth Knight Brigade ROYAL CAPITAL GUARDS	Clarissa Abernethy		
Sixth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, ROYAL CASTLE VICINITY	Zackary Townsend		
Seventh Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, NORTH			
Eighth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, EAST			
Ninth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, SOUTH			
Tenth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, WEST			
Eleventh Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR NORTH	Guy Osbern		Oria Ruud
Twelfth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR EAST	Kurtis Bannister		
Thirteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR SOUTH		Cody	
Fourteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR WEST		Dolph Ruud	
Fifteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Sixteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Seventeenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Eighteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Nineteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Twentieth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			



Chapter 32:

Vacation Time Part 1

TWO MONTHS FLEW PAST after I returned from Sutherland. Before I knew it, it was the height of summer.

Scorching rays of sunlight warmed my skin as I gripped my desk and glared bitterly out the window at Kurtis. He was now assigned to the First Knight Brigade after the people of Sutherland half forced us to let him come to the Royal Capital to be my protector. I was still undergoing new recruit training though, so we hadn't been assigned to anything together yet.

When it came to Kurtis, I had to admit it: I was green with envy watching him trail behind Saviz while I was stuck in my lessons. I couldn't wait for my training period to be over so I could do some real work too. Still, I was a little relieved to see him actually seeming to do the work. He'd been quite the oddball back in Sutherland, to the point that I worried he'd stay glued to my side even in the Royal Capital, just as he had in his past life as my personal knight. But it turned out I was worried for nothing. No, he was happy enough just to stay within running distance of me in case of emergencies. Or maybe it was more than that—maybe he was considerate of the fact that neither of us could do our duties as knights if he stayed glued to my side? Hm. Who knew.

Regardless, he still made every effort to attend to me as much as he could outside of work, thus earning himself the title of “Fia’s Minder” (*Seriously?!).* Desmond said the title was just a joke at Kurtis’s expense though, so I figured I could just leave it be...

“Fia, Captain Kurtis is here for you.”

After finishing another slew of lessons, I was in the cafeteria enjoying the highlight of my day—dinner—when Fabian pointed out Kurtis by the entrance. I’ve been eating with my fellow trainee pals

these past few months. Naturally, that included Fabian. But lately we've been joined by Charlotte, of all people. On top of that, we were frequently joined by Kurtis, Desmond, Quentin, and Zackary. What would you even call this hodge-podge group? I had no idea.

As an aside...I heard through the grapevine that the captains had their own exclusive dining room (which would've been handy to know back when I had lunch with Quentin). Once, I suggested all the captains go eat there instead, but they just gave me funny looks for some reason. But my suggestion wasn't weird at all! Wasn't the whole point of them having their own room so their presence didn't make everyone else uncomfortable? Not that Kurtis really had to worry about that. Today, as with every other day, he tried to beeline it toward where I was sitting, only to be blocked by a number of knights getting up to greet him. He was a member of the First Knight Brigade before being assigned elsewhere, so he had a lot of old acquaintances among them. Above all, though, he was just a really lovable guy.

More and more knights went to chat him up, feeling no hesitation despite his rank as captain. I looked up at him when he finally reached me, and you know what? I couldn't help but think how the admiration he got was well deserved.

"Hey, Kurtis," I said. "We didn't know how long you'd be, so Fabian and I started eating without you. Hope you don't mind."

"I don't mind in the slightest, Lady Fi. Would you mind if I joined you?"

I gave the over-serious captain permission to join us, and he left to go grab his food. Once he was out of sight, Fabian cocked his head and gave me a curious look. "I don't know what's more surprising: that you have three of the twenty captains talking to you so politely, or the fact that I'm starting to get used to it."

"Heh. Oh, Fabian...you think you're oh-so-sly counting Captain Cyril to pad those numbers, but he's polite to *everyone*. You're going to have to do better than that to fool me."

He grinned softly. "I was just keeping things simple," he said teasingly. "But allow me to elaborate: You are the only one Captain Kurtis and Captain Quentin speak to politely, outside of Commander Saviz."

"Gack!" I choked on my food. Didn't expect *that*.

"Speaking of, while Captain Kurtis and Captain Quentin are enough of a handful on their own, they are an absolute menace together. Just the other day they were having a lengthy discussion about what kind of flower would suit you best. And before that, they were discussing what type of weather to liken you to and both concluded you'd be a storm. Why, isn't it miraculous that they can be at such odds while still being so like-minded?"

"F-Fabian, h-have mercy..." I buried my face in my hands and pleaded to be spared the humiliation.

I mean...I guess I already knew those two went off and discussed nonsense about me with utter seriousness, but I was hoping they'd get bored of all that eventually. But even after two months, they were still going strong. Didn't they have anything better to do?

Kurtis returned with his food in hand. He sat in the chair beside Fabian and proudly said, "Tomorrow is the last day of your training, isn't it, Lady Fi? Finally, we can work together as guards."

I smiled, happy to hear he'd been counting down the days until my training finished. "Yeah! Finally, I can make myself useful as a knight!"

A thought crossed my mind then: *Aren't I actually super-duper suited for the First Knight Brigade? As a princess in my past life, I was protected by knights 24/7, so I know what it feels like to be on the side being guarded. Guess that's an advantage nobody else has... Yeah, that's it! Nobody understands how the King and Saviz feel better than me!* I grinned, full of confidence.

"Lady Fi..." began Kurtis, voice dripping with reluctance, "I regret to inform you that there is a considerable difference between

how the Great Saint was guarded three hundred years ago and how guarding is handled now. I do *not* recommend you rely on your rather outdated experience.”

“Huh?” Did he just read my mind?

“At any rate,” he said grimly, “you should spend your time planning how you want to spend your vacation instead of thinking about work. No, even before that, you should think about what you want to eat. We can hold a small celebration tomorrow night to mark the end of your training period.”

“Oooh!” Right! Starting tomorrow, I had a three-week vacation. My mind was more occupied with the word “celebration,” however. *That Kurtis...not only was he counting down the days until my training finished, but he’s even throwing me a little celebration.*

I’d worked hard these past four months—*really* hard! I’d written more poems than I could count, learned to dance (after *a lot* of toe-stepping), and had gotten so good at the continental common language that I could mumble it in my sleep. I’d say I earned a celebration!

When the next day came, I was still in sky-high spirits. At long last, our training ended just before noon. Afterward, all the trainees were gathered for a wrap-up ceremony.

I’d missed a number of lessons because I was sent to the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade for a time, as well as to Sutherland, but apparently, it didn’t matter: I was still lined up alongside my fellow recruits.

Cyril came before us and looked everyone over proudly. “After I speak a few words to you, your time as recruits shall come to an end.” His voice was as soft as ever, but everyone was rapt with attention. With some humor, he praised us for finishing our dues, then brought things to a close with his expectations for us and a word of gratitude. “Congratulations on completing your training, and thank you for your

efforts. We welcome you all as comrades and fellow shields of the Kingdom.”

After the captain’s words, a loud round of applause rang out from the knights in attendance, and then the ceremony was done.

I began making my way back to my room, thinking about how short but sweet the ceremony was, when a voice called out to me.

“Fia.”

“Yes?” I turned and saw Cyril beckoning me to come, so I ran over.

“Kurtis invited me to join your little celebration tonight. Unfortunately, I have some business I can’t miss, so I figured I’d give my regards now while I still could. Congratulations on finishing your training, Fia.”

“Oh, thank you very much!” I hadn’t heard anything about Cyril being invited. Why would Kurtis invite my boss, of all people? Just imagine how awkward that’d be.

“Incidentally, you’ll be on a three-week vacation starting today. Do you have any plans for how you’ll spend it?”

“Ah, right, that. In fact, I do...”

After four months of training with hardly any break, the recruits of the First Knight Brigade were being granted three weeks of vacation. After that, we’d each be assigned to either guarding the King or Saviz, so this was a good last chance for us to refresh ourselves by going home and visiting family before work began in earnest. In my case, however, there were no family members waiting for me back home. My father and my three siblings were all knights, and stationed separately at that.

“Everyone in my family’s a knight, so there’s no point in me going home. They’re all scattered around, doing their duties. That’s why I’m planning to just visit my sister instead.”

“Your sister was with the Eleventh Knight Brigade, in charge of

defending the north, correct? She should be stationed at the northern end of the Kingdom. That's even farther from the Capital than the Ruud territory is, correct?"

He made it sound like a question, but I was smart enough to know not to reply. Cyril (and Desmond, for that matter) had a terrifyingly good memory. He had no need to ask for confirmation because he always, *always* remembered everything. This act he did, phrasing something like a question, was just a setup for the unpleasantness to follow.

As though to add credence to my belief, he continued on without even a pause. "Speaking of the far north, isn't that where Blackpeak Mountain is?"

"Guh?!" I put myself on guard and willed a poker face as best as I could, but he came at me with such a fastball that I couldn't help but let out a yelp of surprise. "O-oh, is it? Huh, I guess it is! Right, right. I'd forgotten such a mountain was there. B-but that place has many terrifying monsters around it, a-and I'm only planning on meeting my sister, so, y'know..."

This was Cyril the worrywart I was dealing with. If I told him about my plans to go to Blackpeak Mountain, he might cancel my vacation time entirely. With that in mind, I smiled and looked as innocent as I could manage.

He stared at me for a few moments, then heaved a defeated sigh. "I understand. But do take Kurtis with you."

"Huh?"

Seeing my confusion, he smiled. "I do not think I can dissuade you from your decision, but the people of Sutherland have entrusted me with your well-being. As I cannot join you for three whole weeks, I'd like to instead leave you in Kurtis's capable hands. He was similarly entrusted with your protection, after all."

"B-but I'm sure Captain Kurtis is busy..."

"Then I suppose he will have to be there on official business. He

will bring important information to the Eleventh Knight Brigade. Not that such an excuse is necessary..." He sighed. "You see, Kurtis already submitted a request for three weeks off quite a while ago. He probably intends to join you, official business or not."

"Huh? But I haven't told him a single thing about where I'm going for my vacation." After all, Kurtis was just as much of a worrywart as Cyril. What, had he figured it out anyway?

Cyril seemed to notice someone behind me. "Speak of the devil! How goes it, Kurtis?"

I turned around and saw Kurtis approaching with a scarlet rose in hand.

"Congratulations on finishing your training," he said, handing me the rose.

"Th-thank you." I took it, thinking it was fitting he'd get me a scarlet one.

Cyril seemed to think the same as he spoke with some admiration. "They say the symbol of the Great Saint of legend was a rose. Even her official portrait displays a scarlet rose wrapped around her wrist. I can see the people of Sutherland didn't ask you to look after their Great Saint for nothing." He turned to face Kurtis then and began explaining his plans for him. "Fia means to head to the northern regions to visit her sister in the Eleventh Knight Brigade. I'll put in a request to have you bring an important correspondence to the Eleventh Knight Brigade Captain, so please join Fia on her journey."

"Understood. However...if we are to go to Blackpeak Mountain, we'll have to trek over a number of other mountains. Considering the length of her stay, three weeks will be a little tight." Kurtis seemed unfazed by the suddenness of Cyril's order, even going so far as to make considerations for the trip.

As for me, I felt a bit miffed. I'd only mentioned I'd be visiting my sister Oria and hadn't said a single word about Blackpeak Mountain...so why was it that these two both sounded so certain I

would go there?! They were completely right, of course, but that's why it was so frustrating!

Cyril thought over Kurtis's words, pressing a finger against his lips. "Indeed...now that she's finished training, she'll have to guard the Royal Family. Commander Saviz wouldn't mind her absence, but His Majesty likes to meet with everyone who'll join the guard...as you know yourself, Kurtis." Cyril glanced at me and smiled as though he'd struck upon an idea. "That said, His Majesty is a busy man. It'll take many days for him to meet with each and every person who's coming out of training. It should be fine if we put his meeting with Fia last. In return, however, I want you to do some work for me in the north."

"Oh, okay. What do you need?" I asked.

"Over the past few months, the territories of the Blackpeak Mountain monsters have shifted considerably, as though one particularly ferocious monster has suddenly appeared in the center to push all the other monsters out. Due to that, there's not enough personnel in the area. Every month, we have to send more and more knights."

"O-oh. I-Is that so...?"

Uh-oh. That's definitely because Zavilia went and returned to the area...phew! It's a good thing I didn't go through with telling Captain Cyril my familiar was a black dragon! If I did, I'd have been lectured for not keeping such a dangerous thing on a tighter leash. Captain Zackary must not have told him either, from the looks of things. Good, good, good.

Seeing that I was in the clear, I chose to pretend I knew nothing. "Oh, you don't say! I guess things like that happen every now and then, huh? Blackpeak Mountain is pretty close to the sea, so maybe what appeared was a sea anemone monster! Or some kind of large... fish...monster?"

"Sea monsters...don't have lungs, so I doubt it could have been from the sea. It appeared suddenly, so a descent from the sky seems more likely."

“Th-the skies, huh? I-I-Interesting...m-maybe it’s a bird-type monster then?” My voice grew shaky as he neared the truth.

“Well, Blackpeak Mountain used to be the black dragon’s stomping grounds, so it’s the opinion of the Eleventh Knight Brigade that it might have returned to its nest.”

“Ohhh, I see! A black dragon, huh? That makes sense! Yeah, you know, that was totally my next guess! A black dragon! Mm-hmm!” I didn’t know what to say now, so I figured I’d just agree with Cyril.

He gave me an exasperated look and heaved a great sigh. “You are just so, so terribly...simple. Kurtis, I worry greatly what might happen if Fia is left to her own devices. Please take care of her.”

“I will do my best,” said Kurtis with a firm nod.

Cyril’s expression eased. “With the situation being as it is, we’ll be able to send you to Blackpeak Mountain as reinforcements to quell the monsters. Officially, you’ll be working from the moment you meet up with the Eleventh Knight Brigade, but you’ll follow the orders of Kurtis instead of anyone there. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!” This was quite the special treatment. My time in the north wouldn’t count toward my vacation this way, and Kurtis would be my boss for the duration. I couldn’t imagine Kurtis ordering me to do anything, though. Was it really fair for this to be considered work?

I had my doubts, but Cyril and Kurtis exchanged a satisfied nod with one another, so I kept my trap shut and didn’t complain. My main goal had been approved; it wasn’t worth saying something silly now and messing that up.

I looked up at the sky. Though far apart, he and I were connected underneath one shared sky. *Zavilia...I don’t want to get in the way of your path to kingdom, but I’m sure you wouldn’t mind a visit, right? I have gifts from Sutherland that I want to give you, and I want to introduce you to Kurtis.*

Without you, the spot atop my tummy feels so empty when I sleep. I’m coming to visit you, my strong, cute friend. Wait for me.

After parting with Cyril and Kurtis, I returned to the dorm. In the end, it seemed like the celebration Kurtis planned for me would just be me and him.

Do I not have any friends?! I wondered, but after thinking about it some more, things made sense. Cyril had business to take care of, Fabian was returning to his family's territory in the afternoon, Charlotte was a kid so she couldn't stay out late... Everyone had proper reasons for not attending, or so I told myself.

It was still just past noon, and the plan was to meet Kurtis in the evening, so I decided to spend the rest of the afternoon shopping. I'd be on the road for the next three weeks, so I had lots of things I needed to prepare. I quickly changed into my outing clothes and made for town.

The Royal Capital was one of the greatest cities of the continent and had a wide variety of shops to prove it. I looked around the various shops with curiosity, telling myself to only buy what I needed for the trip and no more. I caved pretty quickly, though, and bought a variety of needless junk—stuff like a cute pen, a diary, and a fluffy plushie. I hung my head in shame at my lack of self-control. I didn't need any of this for the trip. Okay, one more run-through! This time I'd buy only the essentials—things like towels and underwear.

"Oh my, is that you Fia? Are you out shopping?"

Hearing a sweet voice call out to me, I turned around and saw a beautiful woman with peach-pink hair and amber eyes. Not many people had such doll-like beauty. "Captain Clarissa! It's been a while."

"Indeed, it has," she replied with a smile. This was Clarissa Abernethy, Captain of the Fifth Knight Brigade, the brigade in charge of protecting the Royal Capital. She seemed to be on duty, judging from her knight uniform...although I couldn't help but notice she left

her chest area unbuttoned.

I admired her beauty. Her peach-pink hair perfectly matched the white of her knight uniform. She looked down at the paper bags in my hands with some curiosity.

“I’m heading for the northern end of the Kingdom tomorrow,” I explained, “so I thought I’d buy some necessities.” I wouldn’t actually be bringing anything I was *currently* holding, of course, but I didn’t need to go into that much detail.

“By northern end do you mean Margrave Gazzar’s territory, the one with Blackpeak Mountain? That’s quite the place to visit. Will you be all right?” she said, worry creeping into her voice.

I smiled. “I’m just visiting my sister in the Eleventh Knight Brigade, so I should be fine.”

“Oh my! Are you perhaps bringing her *good news*?” she said excitedly.

“Huh?”

“You know, I’ve always been curious as to which of the men you were betting all your chips on...”

“My...chips?”

“Yes, yes. You know...out of everyone in the Knight Brigade, who would you say you’re most *invested* in.”

Huh? Is she asking...who I would gamble my money on in a fight? But Captain Clarissa is a captain! She should already know who the strongest knight in the brigade is. Maybe she’s trying to test me ’cause I’m a newbie? With that in mind, I thought it over. “Until recently, I’d say Captain Cyril was the easy pick, but Captain Kurtis can probably go toe-to-toe with him now...”

At that moment, I realized my error. *Oh no! I promised Captain Cyril that I’d keep the fact he was stronger than the Commander a secret! How could I forget?!*

To amend my error, I quickly added, “...Or that’s what you’d

think I'd say, but my surefire pick to win is actually Commander Saviz!"

Clarissa's eyes shot wide and gleamed. "Oh, my! You're gunning for Commander Saviz, of all people? My, my, *my*! How unexpected. How very, *very* unexpected! I never would have thought you were the type to aim so high."

I wasn't quite sure what she was talking about, but she sounded thrilled. Surely that meant my answer was satisfactory?

We were about to go our separate ways when our surroundings grew noisy.

"Oh, my, what's going on?" With some worry in her eyes, Clarissa briskly walked toward the source of the commotion.

I quickly followed, and we found a girl surrounded by three rough-looking men. Even from a distance, I could see the girl was cute. She looked like the dainty type that'd get hit on a lot. Right now, though, she was quite literally trembling in her boots. The three men bothering her were all rather tall and broad-shouldered. Judging from the disagreeable grins on their faces, they were trying to push the girl into spending some time with them.

"My, my, how troubling. Of course, those three men are the most at fault here, but these other men sitting on the sidelines, not doing a thing to help her...why, they're no good either..." she murmured as she walked toward the center of the crowd.

I understood where she was coming from myself, but the three rough-looking men seemed strong, wore expensive clothes, and had swords at their hips. If the men were of high status, a commoner might suffer consequences for stepping in. What's more, there was no telling how short-tempered these guys could be. For all anyone knew, they might just instantly draw their swords angered. It was hard for anyone to volunteer themselves to help in this situation.

Of course, all that just made Clarissa even cooler for stepping in herself. She didn't seem to care at all what threat the men posed. I

didn't know how strong she was and didn't want to leave her three-against-one, so I followed close behind. I was off duty, though, so I only had a short sword.

Before we reached them, however, somebody casually called out to the surrounded girl. "Oh, a hair clip in the shape of a butterfly...is that what's considered trendy these days? I hate to bother you while you're busy, but could you tell me where you bought that hair clip?"

Huh? Is now the time to ask that?! I thought as I watched a man brush his way between the three men and talk to the surrounded girl. This new guy was a whole head taller than the three men. His back was turned and I couldn't see his face, but he was clearly well built.

"Oh my..." Clarissa had been hurrying to the scene, but she slowed down upon seeing the man, seemingly amused.

Unlike her, I had no interest in spectating and nervously continued to hurry toward the group.

As I had predicted, the three men who were brushed aside took offense at the larger man's actions. One of them put a hand on him. "She's busy, punk. Go bother someone else."

The larger man seemed not to mind, perhaps ignorant of the tense situation he was in. "No can do. My little sister asked me to buy her one of these hair clips that are so popular here in the Royal Capital. This butterfly hair clip would probably look really good on her; I'm sure she'd be happy if I bought her one."

"You tryin' to screw with us?!"

"Just pick some flower off the side of the road for your sister or something!"

"Yeah, what he said!"

The three men quickly grew aggravated. One of them reached for his sword—and was immediately on his back.

The fallen man and I yelled out in unison: "Huh?"

While everybody was still processing what happened, the large

man tightly gripped one arm each of the two remaining men.

“I’m willing to guess none of you guys have little sisters. They’re tough to take care of, you know? Not even I fully understand what goes on in my little sister’s head. Whenever I irritate her somehow, she doesn’t say a word of complaint. Just pouts and gives me the silent treatment, leaving me all the more mystified as to what I did wrong.”

The two men obviously didn’t care to hear about the large man’s little sister and shouted at him.

“Shut it! Get your hands off us!”

“Yeah, what he said!”

The large man shrugged his shoulders like he was a bit disappointed that they wouldn’t listen to him—then dropped the two men onto their backs as well.

“You may not care *now*, but who knows if you’ll have a little sister someday...” He stopped and got a good look at the three men’s faces, then opened his eyes wide. “Huh. You three were acting without common sense, so I was under the impression you all were just some big children, but you’re actually quite old. Ah...you three probably won’t get any new sisters at your age. But hey, who knows? Maybe you’ll end up with stepsisters or daughters one day. You’ll get it then.”

The large man cocked his head to the side and brought his lecture to an end. From behind, the sight of a grown man cocking his head was rather cute, but something about it must’ve been terrifying to the fallen men. Their faces paled, and they began vigorously nodding their heads.

The large man gave them a satisfied nod, then addressed the trembling girl. “Sorry for bothering you. I’d hate to cause you any more trouble, so I think I’m just going to look for that hair clip on my own.”

“My! What a catch!” Clarissa exclaimed. “He’s chivalrous, strong, and doesn’t demand gratitude. I’d fall for such a man in a

heartbeat.” She stared at the man with interest—then he turned around, and her jaw dropped. “Oooh...and he’s *handsome*...”

I was similarly stunned, but for different reasons. *Huh? What’s he doing here? Didn’t he go back to his country?* In a daze, I murmured the man’s name. “...Green?”

My voice wasn’t anything more than a whisper, but somehow the man picked it up from where he was and looked over with even more shock than me or Clarissa.

“Fia!”

That voice was, without a doubt, that of my old acquaintance.

Green was an adventurer I’d met before I joined the Knight Brigade. “Green” wasn’t his real name but an alias...or that’s what I figured, anyway.

Nostalgically, I thought back to the time we first met.

More than half a year ago now, I underwent my coming-of-age ceremony, was attacked by Zavilia the black dragon, and regained the memories of my past life.

In my past life, I was known as the Great Saint. But in my current life, nobody had found any saintly powers at all during my checkups at ages three and ten. When my memories came back, I had to wonder just how many of my old abilities my current self could use. To find out, I spent the next three months leading up to the Knight Brigade admission exam testing various healing magics on myself. I soon figured out that without an injured or status-ailment-afflicted test subject, it was hard to accurately assess how effective my magic was. That’s when I got the brilliant idea to go on an adventure with some adventurers—those sorts got hurt all the time, after all.

That's when I met Green and his two brothers. They introduced themselves, from oldest to youngest, by the aliases Red, Green, and Blue—each the same color as their hair. Red and Green constantly bled from their foreheads when I met them, so I didn't really question that they were using aliases... With all that weirdness, no surprise that they'd be secretive. From what little I could glean, they were from the Arteaga Empire, one of two superpowers on the continent (the other being Náv).

Red—the older brother—was supposed to succeed his family as heir, but because he was cursed from birth to bleed from the forehead, the succession rights were instead going to be passed to his stepbrother. A diviner foretold that his curse would be undone if he slayed a certain monster native to the Náv Kingdom, so the three brothers trekked all the way here to do so.

The three brothers proved tenacious and ultimately emerged victorious from their battle with the monster. Their curses remained, however, so I offered to undo them myself with my saint powers. Of course—being the ever-cautious girl that I am—I knew it was risky to reveal I was a saint, even to people I'd never meet again. That's why I made myself an infallible cover story. I decided to say I had a curse as well, specifically the “If you don't fight as a saint when you team up with adventurers, you won't get married until you're really old” curse, which also temporarily gave me saint powers. The three of them believed me without a word. Such trusting people!

The only problem was, I didn't know at the time that the saints of this era were far weaker than they used to be, so I *may* have overdone things a little. I mean, I *did* intend to limit myself to what I thought was a normal saint's power level, but...well...I wound up casting strengthening magic on the brothers, attribute-resistance-weakening magic on the monster, regenerating a whole missing limb, and curing Red and Green of the curses they'd had since birth, so...in hindsight, yeah, I *definitely* overdid it.

Well, that was all more than half a year behind me now, so I

tried not to worry about it. I doubted the brothers would go blabbing to anyone anyway, since they were simple-minded enough to take my excuse about my powers being a curse at face value. *Yeah. Things would probably be all right.*

With these last thoughts in mind, I looked up at Green now and saw he looked the same as he did when he parted, pretty green hair and all. Only his expression was different; he seemed more cheerful now. The past half a year must've been good for him. I smiled, happy to see him as well.

Even with Red being the eldest son, the brothers were treated coldly by their family due to their curse. But things must have changed after they killed the monster and had their curse undone. Why else would Green be able to smile so happily now?

With Green and his two absent brothers in mind, I thought, *I'm so happy for you three.*

I reflected back on our adventure together and realized how fortunate it was that Green and I could meet again like this. It was like meeting an old friend, even if we'd only parted half a year ago. Come to think of it, we'd only journeyed together for five short days. Still, it felt good to see him again.

Overjoyed, I ran up and embraced him with a hug. "Green!"

But for some reason, despite having just tossed three bulky men onto their backs himself, he made a loud "Gah!" sound and flopped onto his back as well.

"Huh? Green, are you okay?" *I'm pretty sure there's no way I'd be able to knock you over, no matter how much of a running start I got...*

I cocked my head in confusion, when suddenly he sat up and thrust his hands forward, all red in the face. "Fia, you still haven't fixed that destructive side of yours?! You can't just hug an unmarried man like that! Such behavior is... It's obscene!"

"Huh? Oh, please. You're exaggerating." I frowned at the baseless complaint, then remembered with a start. *Oh, right!*

Red and Green were feared and ostracized for their face-bleeding curse, causing them to go from birth to their twenties and thirties without so much as talking to a woman. Because of that, they blushed at the slightest interaction with the opposite sex despite being grown, bulky men. That being said...

"Huh...I'd forgotten, since the whole face-bleeding thing left such a strong impression, but you're actually super handsome, Green." I got a good look at his face from up close and gave my honest thoughts.

From sitting on the ground, Green leapt backward about a meter, landing on his feet. Such dexterity!

"Eek! Wh-what are you saying?! Are you trying to kill me?!"

"Huh? Of course not. I'm just thinking it's weird you're not more used to interacting with women by now. It's been a whole half-year since your bleeding stopped, hasn't it? I'd figure you'd be a hot item now, since you're so handsome."

"Well, my bad! I may have said I was unpopular because of my face-bleeding, but I was wrong! The problem is *me*! Just the other day I invited a great number of women over for a dinner party, but not a single one of them even tried to talk to me! That's how unpopular I am!"

"Weird. Well, they don't know what they're missing. You're a real catch, Green!"

He fell to his hands and knees and groaned. "Guah! I can't take it! It's only a matter of time before you make my heart give out..."

Even on all fours, he still looked incredibly attractive. His hair gleamed a brilliant shade of green, and his well-built muscles were visible even through his shirt.

Confused, I tilted my head. Green was handsome beyond a doubt, and anyone could tell how kind, strong, and thoughtful he was if they spent just a little time with him. So why was he so unpopular? Maybe women in the Empire don't like macho types?

From behind, Clarissa quietly whispered to me. “In high society, only those of higher standing are allowed to initiate a conversation. Could this ‘Green’ person perhaps be of such high standing that not a single woman from the large group he invited was able to initiate conversation with him?”

“I’m sorry, Captain Clarissa, what was that? I couldn’t quite make out what you said.” She’d whispered pretty faintly, after all.

Instead of repeating herself however, she instead gave me a serious look. “Fia...just who is this man?”

“Huh? Uh...well, he’s an adventurer. We went on an adventure together some time before I became a knight.” I remembered the brothers had said something about not wanting to be outed as being from the Empire, so I omitted that.

Come to think of it, I never did ask what they did for a living in the Empire. From what I heard, they didn’t seem to work as adventurers over there. It was kind of a shame I never thought to ask. That also meant I didn’t know what else to tell Clarissa, so I just gave her a dumbfounded look.

She pursed her lips slightly. “I see...so you don’t know either. But he must be someone of considerable status, since he’s being guarded by a hundred knights. They blended into their surroundings so well that they slipped my notice at first...”

“Captain Clarissa?” She’d muttered something under her breath again, and I still couldn’t hear her. That was when a voice called my name from behind.

“Fia!”

“Whuh?”

I recognized the voice and spun around to find Blue, the youngest of the three brothers, standing there. His blue hair—more beautiful than any jewel—fluttered in the wind, and his one-of-a-kind, shapely face had a broad smile on it.

“I can’t believe it! I’m actually meeting you again!” He shouted,

voice overcome with emotion. Then he ran straight toward me.

“Blue!” I ran to him as well, then spread my arms wide and tried to hug him like I did with Green.

“Gyaah!” Before I could touch him, however, he leapt backward with a yelp. “Fia, what are you doing?! Haven’t you come of age already?! You shouldn’t be trying to touch men so thoughtlessly!”

His hair was as beautiful a blue as blue got, and his looks were terribly fine, but he was just so incredibly shy.

“Pfft...ha ha!” Seeing both the brothers were the same as ever, I couldn’t help but laugh.

According to Green and Blue, they were on vacation and came to the Náv Kingdom’s Royal Capital to mess around. I found it a little strange they’d come all this way just for fun as the trip here was hardly a stroll—our countries even had a third, albeit small, country sandwiched between them—but to each their own, I guess. They must have pretty nice jobs to be able to afford such a long vacation.

I looked up at their faces curiously.

Green seemed to pick up on my burning question. “Is something wrong, Fia?”

“No, I was just wondering if it’s really all right for you two to take such a long vacation, like...financially.”

“Ah, no need to worry there. Thanks to your gracious help, we inherited the ‘family business.’ Red’s back home slaving away to make up for our absence.”

“O-oh, I see. So that’s why he’s not here.”

Aw, *poor Red*, I thought. I didn’t know if they were greengrocers, fishmongers, or whatever, but it was a bit sad to hear that Red was holding the fort down all on his lonesome. They *had* said they were

from a well-to-do family, but I never would've thought they'd be something along the lines of a business-owning family. *Wait, that makes no sense. They're too buff to just be running a shop. Hmm...I retract my earlier words, they must be working as adventurers in the Empire after all!*

Lost in thought, I happened to meet eyes with Clarissa, who had been quietly waiting as the brothers and I gabbed. "Ah! I-I'm so sorry! I forgot to introduce you!"

Ack! Talk about faux pas! This is their first meeting, of course I have to introduce them!

So introduce them, I did.

"This is Captain Clarissa, captain of our Fifth Knight Brigade, in charge of keeping the Royal Capital safe. And these two are, uh, Green and Blue, adventurers I met half a year ago. They're brothers."

Clarissa patiently waited for my introduction to end, then put on a radiant smile and extended a hand toward the brothers. "I'm Clarissa. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My, I had no idea Fia had such marvelous friends. She always struck me as a late-bloomer when it came to romance...but perhaps it takes such a girl to be so blessed with such striking men."

"Uh...sure."

"Yeah...thanks."

Green and Blue returned lackluster, deadpan replies. I was shocked.

Huh?! What's going on? I was so certain they'd blush up a storm, but instead they're acting like they're too cool for her! I gasped. Oh, of course! They're so gobsmacked by Captain Clarissa's cuteness that they're defaulting to being Mr. Cool Guy to try and not look lame. Wait...then what's with their reactions to me? Am I not cute enough? I decided to end that train of thought there to preserve my self-esteem.

Clarissa didn't seem to notice their change in attitude and kept up her brilliant smile. With what sounded like genuine curiosity, she

asked, “Might you two happen to be from another country?”

“Erm. What makes you say that?” Green responded with some caution.

With an angelic smile, she replied, “As part of my work, I’ve memorized all the faces of Náv’s important figures. But wouldn’t you know it, I just can’t seem to recall your faces.”

Her words struck me as odd. “Uh, Captain Clarissa, Green and Blue aren’t VIPs or anything like that. At least, I don’t think they are...”

Green and Blue stiffened suddenly, then scratched their heads.

Clarissa gave a casual sweeping glance around at her surroundings. Her lips curled into an amused grin. “Oho...so Fia’s word is law? The moment she said you two weren’t anyone important, the hidden guards encircling us scattered to keep up the pretense. They are absurdly loyal to Fia for some reason, but that in itself doesn’t seem to be cause for alarm...”

“Captain Clarissa, did you say something?” I asked. Once again, Clarissa spoke in hardly a whisper. I guess she was just the sort of person who spoke her thoughts out loud?

“Hee hee, no, nothing! I was just musing that it’s been a while since I’ve met anyone so tantalizingly interesting. Unfortunately, these two seem to have no eyes for me but are instead infatuated with another young lady. Perchance, did you two come to this country to meet said young lady?”

Green and Blue didn’t reply, which I thought was rude—but then Clarissa smiled as though finally grasping something. As for me, I was completely in the dark. I didn’t see them move an inch, but maybe I missed something?

“Hee hee...oh dear. I only said such in jest, but to think I was actually right. Just to be sure, you two wouldn’t *ever* force Fia into doing anything she didn’t want, would you?” She held the same lovely smile, but I could swear there was a faint chill to it now.

Stone-faced, Green said, “We would never do anything Fia didn’t want or even think of bringing harm to her.”

“I see. I’ll accept those words...for now.” She smiled, satisfied. “Pushing any further here could cause problems for both our sides if you two are actually what I think you are. At any rate, Fia’s true escort has arrived.”

Before Clarissa’s smile could fade, a voice called out to me. “Lady Fi!”

Before even turning around, I knew who it was. There was no way I could mistake that voice.

“Kurtis?” I said. *Huh? Weren’t we supposed to meet up in the evening?*

I looked and saw Kurtis there, just like I had expected, only he was out of his knight uniform. He wore plain clothes with a sword, looking very much like a mercenary. He ran up and stood between the brothers and me.

“K-Kurtis? What’s wrong?” I said his name again—he hadn’t replied, and he looked a bit wary of Green and Blue. Still, he didn’t reply. He simply stood there with his back to me, as though trying to act as a wall to protect me.

I looked at the broad set of shoulders before me and blinked a few times, flummoxed.

What’s with Captain Kurtis? Then again, this was his first time meeting Green and Blue. Kurtis probably assumed the worst, what with him being a big worrywart and Green being a big guy.

Now understanding Kurtis’s actions, I stepped out from behind him and patted his arm reassuringly. “It’s okay, Kurtis. These two are acquaintances of mine. This green-haired man is Green, and the blue-

haired one is Blue. We adventured together for a bit in a forest near the Ruud territory.”

“Is that right?” Kurtis mused. “They came all the way from their Empire to the Kingdom for an *adventure*? Sounds like a pastime only royalty could enjoy.”

“Huh?!” I exclaimed. How’d he know they were from the Arteaga Empire just like that?

Green and Blue silently stared at Kurtis, wary expressions on their faces.

C’mon, Captain Kurtis, you don’t have to show off, you know? Sussing out something like that without any hints was a feat no ordinary person could pull off—and he had done it so confidently too. There was no doubt in Kurtis’s voice, as though he was a hundred-percent sure he was right. I mean, he *was* right, but that was a problem in its own way. Kurtis was nice to have as an ally, but he could be a little *too* talented for his own good.

I frowned disapprovingly. Just then, a knight ran up to Clarissa in a hurry. “Captain Clarissa! Viscount Gatter’s son is causing problems in a central district restaurant. We require your assistance—we can’t lay a hand on him!”

“Oh dear, and just when things were getting interesting here! Oh well. I better do the job I’m paid for. Until next time, Fia. And I leave the rest of this to you, Kurtis.” With great reluctance and a sigh, Clarissa left with the knight.

With the loss of our most socially gifted member, the group fell silent.

Uhh...this isn’t good. Pretending to not notice the cutthroat atmosphere, I gave my voice as much pep as I could and continued introducing the two parties to each other from where I left off. “And this here is Captain Kurtis! He’s in charge of protecting Sutherland, located at the southernmost end of the Kingdom, but he’s staying here in the Royal Capital for the time being.”

I smiled as hard as I could, but the three men remained expressionless and continued to stare—no, *glare*—at each other.

Unable to take the tension any longer, I spun around and looked at all three. “What is going on with you guys?!” I yelled. “Don’t you know a friend of a friend is supposed to be a friend?!”

“That isn’t necessarily always the case, Lady Fi. More importantly, I don’t recall hearing anything about this adventure you went on half a year ago. Would you be willing to tell me who comprised this party you journeyed with?”

“Huh? Uh...” His tone of voice alarmed me a bit, and when I looked up at him, I saw he had a fierce glare trained on me. *Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap.* Kurtis was in his “personal knight mode,” something I saw frequently in my past life.

“I journeyed with three men named Red, Green, and Blue who I had only just met, tee hee!”...was something I definitely could not say here. He’d get angry at me for sure. Even if I put a cutesy spin on it or said it all sorry-like, he’d still get mad.

Wh-what do I do?

Cornered, I did the only thing I could. I put on a goofy grin and tried to talk my way out of the predicament. “Ehe heh heh heh! Oh, Kurtis, you’re so silly. Who cares about the past? These brothers are all gentlemen. More importantly, how’d you know they were from the Empire?”

But Kurtis was having none of it. His glare only grew harsher. “I take it you journeyed alone with a group of men you’d only just met, then. Very well. This is not a conversation to be had publicly; let’s save it for when we’re alone. As for how I knew the origins of these two...”

Huh? Did I choose wrong? I thought, then deeply regretted my decision. If he was going to get mad at me no matter what, I’d rather get things done and over with as quickly as possible. If he was going to wait until we were alone, it meant a long and grueling lecture was

waiting for me. *Aaaaah! What have I done?!*

I hung my head in defeat as Kurtis continued. “Their hair colors and the names ‘Green’ and ‘Blue’ bear a resemblance to a certain trio of brothers that have taken center stage in the Empire. Hmph. If only we had a third brother, perhaps named ‘Red,’ to complete the trio.”

“Whoa, you know about their older brother Red?!” I exclaimed. “Oh, but just so you know, those names are only aliases.”

Kurtis nodded with understanding. “Ah, yes. That’s how the tale went. The three brothers introduced themselves with aliases to their Goddess, so they chose to make those aliases their real names. It’s quite a famous story in the Empire.”

“Huh? Ohhh, I see. The Empire believes in the Goddess of Creation, and there’s some people from the Empire who’ve actually met the Goddess. In other words, uh...the names of the three brothers from that story, ‘Red,’ ‘Green,’ and ‘Blue,’ were used by Green and Blue here, and from that you were able to tell they were from the Empire?”

“That’s...more or less right,” said Kurtis, though the look on his face said that there was something else he wanted to say. With another nod of understanding, he added, “So you don’t know who these men really are.”

“What?”

“It’s nothing. There’s no dire need for you to know,” he murmured. He looked to the brothers. “Hello, Green and Blue,” he said icily. “I am Kurtis. It is nice to meet you. But you may leave now. Lady Fi has me to protect her. Please, return to your homeland, knowing she is safe.”

“Kurtis! I know you’re only wary because you care for me, but at least try to talk to them. They’re wonderful people. If you get to know them, you’ll see.” Surprised by his coldness, I urged him to be a little kinder.

To my shock, he disobeyed me for once. “There’s nobody in this

world more wonderful than you, Lady Fi. Having known you, I have no desire to know anyone else.”

“Kurtis!” I gave him a stern look. “You know, I was thinking our evening celebration could use more people than just the two of us. Why don’t we invite Green and Blue?”

“I must admit, I don’t like that idea very much.”

“But it’s my first time seeing them in over half a year. We have a lot to catch up on.”

He paused for a long moment. “It is...your celebration. If you wish, we shall invite them.”

The fact that I wanted him to get along with the two brothers must have finally gotten through to him. He still seemed a little reluctant, but he relented.

Hee hee. Captain Kurtis can be a worrywart, but he’s still so kind. I’m sure he’ll warm up to Green and Blue in no time.

I turned to Green and Blue. “Will you two be in the Royal Capital for a while? Kurtis and I were planning to have dinner together tonight, but you two are free to join us if you have time.”

“Really?!”

“Of course we’ll come!”

They responded simultaneously. That’s brothers for you—perfectly in sync.

I smiled. “Great. Let’s meet at six in the evening by that water fountain over there. I’ll see you two later.”

I kept on waving until they were out of sight, happy to be able to meet two friends again...and now we even had dinner plans!

Side Story:

Kurtis, Captain of the Thirteenth Knight Brigade

GOODNESS...*what a pair she's come across.* With great exasperation, I watched the two men, their hair shining like jewels, keep their gaze firmly on Lady Fi.

When I arrived, I'd found Lady Fi with Fifth Knight Brigade Captain Clarissa and these two men. With a single glance, I could tell from the way they carried themselves that they were no ordinary pair. What's more, I could sense a hundred knights scattered among the surrounding crowd without even looking. The knights were well hidden, enough to pass my notice at first, and disguised well enough to blend in with the crowd. Even most high-ranking nobility didn't have protection like this, and I didn't recognize the two newcomers' faces even though I knew the faces of everyone important in the Kingdom—which meant they weren't from our country. Having surmised that much, I knew these two definitely had the air of the ruling class about them.

How troublesome. I had an ill-boding premonition about it all. No matter how much I wanted to ignore the facts, it was impossible to do so when the sun shone down, so clearly illuminating their jewel-like hair. All at once, I remembered what I had heard of the Arteagian Imperial Family—of their beautiful hair and the three brothers held in highest esteem.

Why did I remember such a thing now? I wanted to scold my good memory for dredging up such a tidbit at this most unfortunate time.

The Arteaga Empire was a large nation only one small country away from ours. Because we didn't share a border, talk of its emperor rarely reached the Kingdom. Even so, seeing the gleaming hair of those two men brought a certain discussion to mind.

“They say the emperor of the Arteaga Empire has changed recently.”

“The new emperor and his two brothers are each named after jewels that match the color of their hair.”

One after another, against my will, I recalled facts about the Arteagian Imperial Family. I tried to block it all out till my head ached, but it was no use.

From what I recalled, the emperor and his two brothers announced to the citizenry that they had, by chance, met their Goddess half a year ago. Most disrespectfully, they had introduced themselves under aliases. To rectify their mistake, they chose to add their aliases to their real names. The emperor’s name changed from Ruby to Red Ruby, and his brothers’ names changed from Emerald and Sapphire to Green Emerald and Blue Sapphire respectively. In other words, the brothers had given the aliases Red, Green, and Blue to their Goddess...

As I gradually sorted through my thoughts, I gave Lady Fi a hard look, then looked at the green- and blue-haired men.

What an eerie coincidence. Here before me were two foreign men, clearly highborn, with beautiful green and blue jewel-like hair, just like that of the two Arteagian princes. What was more, Lady Fi had just said she met them half a year ago, which coincided with the time the emperor and his brothers met their Goddess. Last but not least, Lady Fi introduced the two as Green and Blue, the same aliases the princes had given their Goddess.

Everything fit so perfectly...disconcertingly so.

Greatly exasperated now, I spoke, “Their hair colors and the names ‘Green’ and ‘Blue’ bear a resemblance to a certain trio of brothers that have taken center stage in the Empire. Hmph. If only we had a third brother, perhaps named ‘Red,’ to complete the trio.”

As certain as I was now, I wanted to make one last desperate effort to disprove this obvious truth. But to my dismay, the merely-circumstantial evidence I had until now turned damning as Lady Fi’s

eyes went wide.

“Whoa, you know about their older brother Red?! Oh, but just so you know, those names are only aliases.”

Even confirming that they’re using aliases, Lady Fi... Way to kick a man when he’s down.

I stifled an exasperated sigh and went along with her. “Ah, yes. That’s how the tale went. The three brothers introduced themselves with aliases to their Goddess, so they chose to make those aliases their real names. It’s quite a famous story in the Empire.” I kept my words vague; I couldn’t openly state that the Imperial Family was present in such a public place.

To my surprise, Lady Fi tilted her head. “Huh? Ohhh, I see. The Empire believes in the Goddess of Creation, and there’s some people from the Empire who’ve actually met the Goddess. In other words, uh...the names of the three brothers from that story, ‘Red,’ ‘Green,’ and ‘Blue,’ were used by Green and Blue here, and from that you were able to tell they were from the Empire?”

“That’s...more or less right.” I looked at her genuinely mystified expression and came to one conclusion. “So you don’t know who these men really are.”

But of course... Lady Fi has never been the type to judge someone based on their social standing. When it proved necessary, she had acumen like no other and could discern one’s identity in an instant like a true genius. But when such discernment proved unnecessary and her interest wasn’t piqued (as was often the case) she would fail to see where others stood in the world.

This instance must be the latter, which meant there was no need for me to bring it up and cause needless trouble. With that in mind, I looked at the men who called themselves Green and Blue. In all likelihood, they were Green Emerald, first in the line of succession for the Arteagian throne, and Blue Sapphire—the second in line. It was a risky business for them to sneak into the Kingdom, with our two

nations being rival superpowers on the continent. Normally, people of their high standing never left their own country; if they had to, it'd only be after going through proper channels. But none of the captains, including me, had been warned of their visit, which meant they had to be here in secret. In other words, I was getting caught up in a very abnormal situation. And yet I felt no panic about the whole thing at all, because Lady Fi was involved.

It was looking like Lady Fi was the so-called Goddess who the emperor and his brothers had met. Just what nonsense had she pulled for them to believe she was a Goddess in only a few days' time?

At any rate, having foreign imperial royalty loitering around her was only asking for trouble, considering her Great Saint powers. I needed to get rid of them as fast as I could. With that in mind, I rudely asked them to leave, simultaneously trying to gauge how serious they were about Lady Fi. To my surprise, the two didn't reprimand me despite my failure to appreciate their station. In fact, they didn't even seem to take offense and simply held their silence.

How strange. Didn't one's status make the man? These two men were the only ones on equal standing with the emperor, so it was no exaggeration to say the three collectively stood at the apex of the Empire. They should be used to being revered, served, and worshipped...yet they cared not about my insolent behavior.

Things must be worse than I thought. These two high-standing men were so infatuated with Lady Fi that they could blow off any disservice that came their way. Their behavior didn't match what I'd heard from rumors of them either. They were known to act with utter disinterest toward the opposite sex, to the point of being known as the "Ice Princes," but it looked like they thawed around Lady Fi.

Now then, what to do... There was much I took issue with in the situation, but the best thing to do was to not get involved with them whatsoever. I was about to forcibly bid them farewell and take Lady Fi with me when she instead insisted she wanted to talk to them.

Right. This is the kind of person she's always been. I caved, remembering she had been like this in our previous lives as well. She had been more well known then, of course, but the number of people that could stand to be with her were few.

Everyone caused a few problems now and then. Unfortunately, the higher one's status, the grander those problems became. I couldn't count the number of times she casually said she wanted to talk to someone and caused grand, unnecessary issues in the process. Worst of all, she never learned from her mistakes and continued to repeat her errors. Or perhaps—no, without a doubt—she didn't consider her behavior to be a problem at all.

I allowed myself to heave a great sigh. Truth be told, I had rather expected that things would turn out like this. Whether in the past or in the present, to be with Lady Fi meant bearing much hardship. Resigned to my fate, I looked at her and saw a brilliant, full smile.

"I can't wait to eat dinner with Green and Blue! Kurtis. Make sure you get along with them, you hear?"

"I...look forward to dinner as well."

Ah yes, that smile. Countless people have stood by her side and fallen victim to that mirthful grin of hers. But even with all the endless joy I saw in her now, I couldn't help but grit my teeth.

Of all places, why did it have to be the Arteaga Empire...?

There was an unpleasant feeling inside me as I looked at her wordlessly. Even now, she still had a joyous smile on.

Once again, I swore my heartfelt vow: *I shall protect you, Fia.*

Lady Fi had no idea, I'm sure, but Goddess worship had only begun in earnest in the Arteaga Empire immediately following the death of Great Saint Serafina. Furthermore...

Well, I must admit that I couldn't help but grin at the irony of it all. It was an eerie coincidence indeed for the current Arteagian Emperor to see Lady Fi as their Goddess...

For the Great Saint was, in truth, the very Goddess the Empire worshipped.

Chapter 33:

Vacation Time Part 2

AFTER PARTING with Green and Blue, Kurtis said I must be tired and kindly suggested we take a break, dragging me along to a café that served sweets.

I was too smart to fall for his deceptive smile, of course, and kept insisting that I wasn't tired and wanted to shop some more, but he gently—albeit still forcibly—hailed me into a café chair anyway.

At which point I received the usual talk. He scolded me, saying it was improper and foolish for a woman of my age to go on some trip with three men I didn't know. At first, I stayed silent—I mean, he wasn't *wrong*—but things dragged on long enough that I couldn't help but get irritated.

“Kurtis, it wasn't just ‘some trip’! It was an adventure that would decide the fate of three brothers!” Worked up, I couldn't help but exaggerate a bit.

In turn, he exaggerated a bit as well. “That's even worse! Their fate is their own to handle. You have no reason to help them. If a mortal were to meet a Goddess, they'd grow dependent on them.”

Wait, what was he getting at here? This was probably some metaphor using the Empire's religion, but what did it mean? Still, if I said outright that I didn't understand, he'd only grow more frustrated and draw this out, so I just nodded thoughtfully. *Heh heh, I'm maturing by the day, you know!*

It seemed to do the trick, or maybe he was just satisfied with having said his piece. Either way, he brought things to a close by saying he had already given up on doing anything about this, since he was used to dealing with my mess.

Oh? Why's he look so exhausted when I'm the one being scolded here? Perhaps scoldings were just as unpleasant for the scolder as they

were for the scoldie? *But if they're so unpleasant for both parties, wouldn't it be better to just not do them at all?*

With such revolutionary thoughts in mind, I returned to shopping with Kurtis. I couldn't help but notice just how capable he was, even during a simple activity like shopping. Whenever I told him what I was looking for, he'd take me to the closest possible store that sold it, as though he had a built-in map in his head. Before I could even point to things I needed for the trip, they'd already be in his hands. He even had all the items delivered to the Knight Brigade's female dormitories for me. I always tried to carry everything myself when I went shopping, no matter how heavy things got—I'm thrifty, you know, and I don't like delivery fees—but Kurtis paid for the fees without any fuss before I even noticed. When I *did* notice, I insisted I'd pay, of course, but he refused to take my money!

Feeling bad, I said, "Thank you, Kurtis. I know you get paid a lot more as a captain, but don't do anything you don't want to, okay?"

He gave me a look like he had lots to say.

"Is something wrong, Kurtis?"

He murmured something strange then. "No, it's just..." And his voice lowered. "Unless you royally messed things up, your holy stones should be able to fetch you a sum no captain could match, but..." He coughed, and then I could hear him again. "I'm sure you'd find a way to royally mess things up."

"I'm sorry, what? Royally mess what up?"

"No, nothing. I was just thinking once again..." He seemed to come to some strange conclusion. "We need a greater variety of personnel with different talents to take care of you."

"Uhh, I've been doing quite fine on my own, thank you very much," I objected.

"As someone who doesn't think in losses and gains, I'm sure you feel you're doing just fine," he said matter-of-factly. "But as someone who *does* think in losses and gains, Lady Fi, I feel you have a lot of

room to improve.”

“Guh?!” Now that he mentioned it, the plushie I bought a little while back was about ten percent cheaper at another store. If Kurtis was going plushie-hunting, he’d definitely have known there was a cheaper store nearby and wouldn’t have wasted his money like I did.

I bore the humiliation and admitted my fault to him to show I understood his point. To my surprise, he said that he was talking about something else entirely. *Gah?! Then what’d I just humiliate myself for?!*

Afterward, we continued to look around whatever store caught my fancy until it was time for our meetup. We made for the water fountain in the central plaza.

We arrived fifteen minutes early, but Green and Blue were already there. They had changed their clothes too. Earlier, they had on these plain-looking shirts that just screamed “I’m an adventurer,” but now they had on shirts with high collars that came up to the neck, as well as some colorful, fancy outerwear on top. They looked like civil officials in these duds, or maybe even nobles. It was surprising how different they looked. Clothes really did make the man.

“Sorry we kept you waiting, Green, Blue!” I said. “I see you two changed. It’s the first time I’ve seen you guys in collared shirts, but you look good! You could totally pass for nobles!”

“Eek! Like I keep telling you, Fia, you can’t say such things! If you seriously don’t want us to die an early death, you must never compliment us again!” Green grimaced as though I’d uttered a hex against him.

“He’s right! Fia, the next time you compliment me, I’m afraid I’ll have no choice but to compliment you back three times as much!” Blue said, which was a little much.

I giggled. “Aren’t these guys funny, Kurtis? They’re too self-conscious around Captain Clarissa so they try to be cool with her, but with me they put their bashfulness on full display.”

Kurtis didn't seem to find it funny, however. In fact, his brow was heavily creased. "If there's anything 'funny' here, it's your novel interpretation of their behavior. Why do you assume their reaction to you is normal for them?"

"Huh? Well, these two—actually three with their older brother—have always been bashful like this, ever since I first met them. Women avoided them their whole lives—even recently, when they had a dinner party, no women came to talk to them. So they don't have any experience with women and blush just from talking with them."

I gave an honest answer, but Kurtis looked at me with dubious eyes. "You really do believe anything you're told, huh? Regardless, at the moment, I believe they are without a doubt sought after by women. If anything, these men should be exhausted by the very presence of the fairer sex."

"Hee hee! So even a guy like you thinks Green and Blue are good-lookers?"

"*I said no such thing.* I just think many women would be drawn to men of their standing is all," he said a bit strongly.

Oh, Kurtis. Kurtis, Kurtis, Kurtis. There's nothing wrong with a man admitting he thinks another man is good-looking, you know? Or are you saying that looks aren't everything? I guess their hearts of gold are readily apparent too! No wonder they're popular!

I had the strangest feelings Kurtis would get along just swell with the brothers. A friend of a friend made for a friend indeed, did it not?

Together, we made our way to the restaurant where Kurtis had made a reservation.

The restaurant Kurtis picked out was a quiet place only one

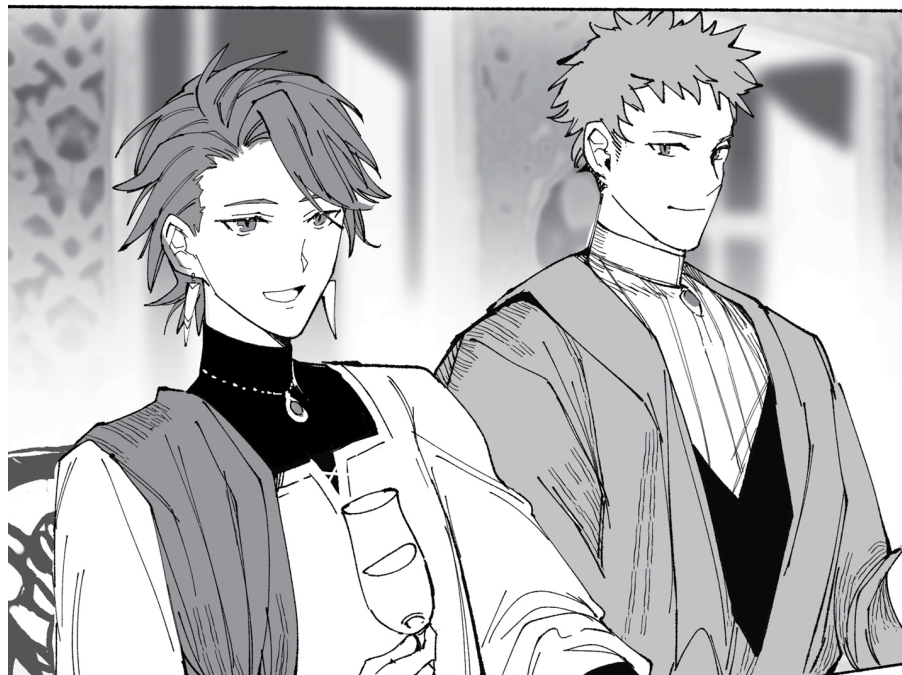
block off the city's main street. There, a waiter greeted us and showed the four of us to a spacious private room. I don't know if Kurtis reserved a private room from the get-go or if he changed the reservation after the plan changed to include Green and Blue, but it was thoughtful of him regardless.

Kurtis is just so perfect at everything, huh? I thought to myself as I picked up a chilled glass. A pink, bubbly liquid was poured for me.

"Congratulations on finishing your training, Lady Fi," said Kurtis, raising his glass. "May many good things come your way. Cheers!"

We all raised our glasses in kind. I put my glass to my lips and relished the flavor.

"Mmm, that's delicious! This drink is amazing!"



How lucky I was to drink something so wonderful! I smiled at Kurtis beside me, then looked at Green and Blue sitting across from us. They'd already emptied their glasses and were staring at me intently.

"Oh dear, let me fill your glasses up again," I said. The waiter had poured our first glasses but left the room afterward, probably to give us space. I quickly reached for the bottle, but Green grabbed it before me and moved it out of my reach. *Gah. It's times like these that I curse my short arms.*

I gave Green a sour look only to receive a serious one back. "Fia, allow me to thank you first."

"Huh? Oh, for inviting you two to dinner?"

"For that as well, yes, but also for everything else too—especially for saving us during our battle against the Twin-Headed Turtle." Green bowed his head, then gave Kurtis a glance.

Kurtis offered him an unamused shrug. "Please, speak freely. Why, you may even pretend I'm not here. You've probably already realized by now, but I more or less understand your...*circumstances*. Nothing you confess to her will be of much surprise to me. Furthermore, while I am bound by duty to the Kingdom, reporting information without definite proof is not something I am fond of."

Green nodded briefly at that. "Thank you for your consideration. Sadly, my position doesn't allow me to be as forthright as I'd like, and I'm not so rash as to take a needless risk, so I do not think I can indulge your, ah, kindness. Of course, I understand you're being so accommodating not for our sake, nor to fulfill your vocation's duty, but rather because...the one you protect wills it."

I watched Kurtis and Green speaking to each other at length and tilted my head. *Huh? These two just met, yet they're already talking on the same level. Since when did they get so buddy-buddy?* I grinned, happy to see my friends getting along.

Green, holding a bottle in one hand, cocked his head to the side. "Fia, can I ask you for something?"

My, my. What an adorable gesture for such a big man to make. “But of course.”

“Could you stop speaking so politely to me and my brothers?”

“Huh?”

“We may be older, but now you’re an adult too. And we’re basically equals, seeing as we’ve been on an adventure together.”

“Now that you mention it, you might be right...”

He had a point. The rules adventurers followed were different from the rules the Knight Brigade upheld. When one adventured in a party, they did so as equals...at least, I thought that’s how it was. Uncertain, I tossed the idea around in my head.

Then Green said something strange. “If anything, we’re the ones in your debt a million times over. We should be the ones showing you the deference you deserve. We would like to do so, if you’d allow it.”

I protested at once. “Absolutely not! I mean, I doubt you even know *how* to speak politely, Green.”

I could see Red and Blue, the oldest and youngest brother respectively, speaking politely—but Green? He definitely lacked the class for that stuff. I could just barely recall him saying a brief sentence or two with decorum a good while back, but I doubted he could manage any more than that.

Offended, Green’s eyes widened. “Hey, hold on! Just what kind of boorish fool do you take me for?”

“Heh heh, that’s funny, Brother,” Blue chimed in. “I could swear you told us yourself that the ladies don’t like you because you’re too boorish. Looks like your little lie has a grain of truth in it after all.”

“Wait, no! I just—”

Green began to argue, but I saw the topic was getting dragged out, so I cut in. “Green, you’re fine as you are! Even if you can’t speak politely or have never held a girl’s hand, you’re my wonderful adventuring buddy and nothing can change that!”

“Fia...” Green beamed emotionally and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“That’s the benevolent Goddess for you,” Blue muttered and blushed, covering his mouth with both hands.

This is my chance! I thought and quickly extended my now empty glass before Green. “Refill, please!”

“Huh?” Green looked like the wind had suddenly been taken from his sails, his eyes widening in surprise.

Kurtis laughed. “Pfft ha ha ha. Lady Fi, please show some consideration! Let them bask in the moment for at least a little.”

Green’s fingers gripped tightly around the bottle as he gave me a challenging look. “Fia, you’re just so... All right, fine! If you can drop that polite speech of yours, I’ll pour you as much as you like!”

“Gimme, gimme, gimme!” I cried, almost running over his words. “Let me drink till my stomach bursts!”

“You sure folded easily,” he said with some exasperation. He sighed, then filled my glass to the brim.

“*Whoa!* Is it really all right to pour me so much expensive liquor? I thought that was only allowed with the cheap stuff! I’m not used to drinking such quality liquor; I feel like my world’s being turned upside down! I’ll take it, though! Hee hee hee! This is at least two normal glasses’ worth.” It was bad manners to try and sip off the top of a full glass, and I didn’t want to get scolded by Kurtis, so I drank quickly. “Delicious! Aaah...the flavor is just out of this world!”

For some time afterward, the four of us talked, ate, and drank. We first talked about the training I’d just finished, and I was more than happy to share the hardships I went through:

There was that one time Cyril popped in on a poetry lesson and partnered with me on a collaborative project where we complimented one another in alternating lines of poetry. Midway through, however, he said, “I now see why nobody dares be your partner!” and fled. There was the time the chess-loving Desmond walked in half-dead

after forty-eight straight hours of work, only to fly into a rage when a subordinate showed up to inform him that more work came in. Yet another time, I stubbed Fabian's toe thrice in a single dance lesson, but he just smiled like nothing happened, being the dazzling sweet prince of a man he was.

Blue made a jealous face and said something about how fun knight training in the Kingdom sounded. I tried to explain how rigorous our training actually was, but I don't think it got across.

Our next topic of conversation was what I'd do after my training. I told them about how I was planning to leave the Royal Capital the very next day. The brothers' eyes darted wide.

"That's why I'm so glad I could meet you guys today," I said. "I'm taking off for the north tomorrow, so we were *that* close to missing one another."

Blue raised his voice. "What?! The north? Where *specifically* in the north? Are you being assigned to guard the north now that you've finished training?"

He seemed genuinely surprised, so, with some smugness, I replied, "Nope! Heh heh heh... The thing is, I actually have more than three weeks of vacation, would you believe it? I'm using it to go visit my sister. You probably don't know her, but she's this super cool and talented knight protecting the northernmost part of the Kingdom!" I puffed out my chest with pride and grinned.

"Whoa, really?!" Blue exclaimed. "The northernmost part of the Náv Kingdom is full of mountains, right? A lot of wicked monsters live on mountains... That's a dangerous place to work."

Yep, yep! My sister's so amazing that even that danger is nothing to her! I grinned broadly, interpreting Blue's words as nothing but a compliment for my sister.

"Oh, and this is just a secret between us here," I said, "but I actually have a familiar. He's returned temporarily to his home on Blackpeak Mountain, so I'm planning to see him while I'm in the area

visiting my sister. I guess it's kind of like checking in on an old flame who's returned to their family home?"

"B-Blackpeak Mountain, you say..." Blue murmured, still hung up on that part.

Kurtis, on the other hand, was calm as he chided me. "Lady Fi, comparing your familiar to a significant other isn't quite appropriate. The relationship of a familiar and its owner is that of master and servant."

"O-oh, is it? Umm, well, anyway, I met my familiar when they were only a wee baby, but they left for their home because they had something they needed to do. I'm a bit worried for them. They're still just a kid and were super injured when I first met them—but I guess the biggest reason I want to see them is just that I miss them."

"Your familiar's young, but they live on Blackpeak Mountain...? I'm surprised they've survived so long, with how weak they must be." Blue observed how thin the proof of pact on my wrist was and frowned sadly. It looked like he had something he wanted to say, but then Green smacked him on the head. "Ow! Ah—I mean, I'm sure your familiar is fine! I'm just a little worried about the danger, Fia!"

"There's no need to worry," said Kurtis immediately, "I'll be by her side the whole time."

For some reason, that reassurance only made Blue frown. "What was that? I could swear you phrased that like you would be going with her *alone*. This is *the* Blackpeak Mountain we're talking about here, you know? The place is crawling with fiendish monsters who make the place their home; going as a party of two is just suicidal!"

So he said, but I wasn't going to hunt monsters or anything. I just wanted to meet Zavilia. Things shouldn't be that dangerous.

After taking a moment to think, Blue seemed to make up his mind about something. "All right...Fia, I haven't told you yet, but the truth is...I'm cursed."

“Whaaaaat?!” I jumped out of my chair, shocked at Blue’s sudden confession, and looked him over from head to toe. “You’re cursed? Oh no, what do we do?! I can’t tell what sort of curse you have at all! This is the first time I’ve even seen a curse I couldn’t figure out how to remove just by looking. Your curse must be insanely powerful!”

I kept looking him over, up and down, but I couldn’t see what part of him was cursed. Ashamed of my own ineptitude, I looked at Blue with sad eyes.

His gaze wandered about the room as though he were flustered. In a shrill voice, he said, “Y-yeah, uh, th-that might be. Um... I’m sorry. I’m really, really, sorry. Please forgive me.”

“Blue?” His face was growing redder and redder, so I called his name, wondering if he was all right.

Even his neck started to turn red as he averted his gaze. Nervousness in his voice, he continued, “Um, the curse I have is... O-oh! The curse I have can’t be removed by powerful shamans or saints, so there’s nothing you can do about it, Fia. Y-yeah, it’s a special kind of curse only somebody really weak can remove.”

“Huh? Whoa...I’ve never even heard of that!”

From beside me, Kurtis calmly said, “Of course you haven’t. Moreover, *ordinary* saints can’t even use status ailment recovery magic, a fact that seems to have slipped the mind of everybody here. Both superior saints and inferior saints alike can do nothing about curses.”

“What’s that now?” I felt like Kurtis had said something super important, but my alcohol-addled brain wasn’t putting two and two together very well. Slowly, I tried to gather my scattered thoughts, then belatedly remembered something else super important and covered my mouth with both hands.

Oh, right! I was comfortable talking about my saint powers in front of Green and Blue since they'd seen me use them before, but now that I really thought about it, I had explained away my powers then as being part of my own temporary curse. *Yikes! I almost outed myself just now! I forgot my curse being removed and my powers being gone was the story I was going with! I'm not supposed to be a saint at all!*

And yet I'd just said I couldn't see Blue's curse—which was something only a saint would ever say. Nobody pointed it out, at least—probably because we were all too drunk—so I could maybe let it pass unnoticed. Still, just to be safe...

"Oh, whoa?! What's this?! Because I learned about Blue's curse, my own curse—which was supposed to be gone for good—is now temporarily back! Maybe this means I can use saint powers again?"

Smooth as silk! I swept my gaze over the brothers to see if they'd bought it. Green and Blue looked at me with their mouths agape. Kurtis, on the other hand, looked like he was dealing with a headache. He had his head in his hand. Oops.

"Kurtis?" I said cautiously.

He shook his head lightly and groaned. "I see now that I was sorely mistaken, Lady Fi. I thought calmly pointing something out would help things along, but it only complicated them further. I had no idea you would try to hide a truth already made painfully obvious."

"Whuh?"

"These two can't speak of your identity, given their circumstances. And there's no point in hiding anything, since I presume they've already seen your powers, so I figured you wanted to save them both the trouble by coming clean yourself. But it would seem we were *all* misunderstanding something on some level... Ah, but to my point: Lady Fi, I am *truly* amazed by this oh-so wonderfully convenient curse you have."

Kurtis had gone off on some hard-to-follow tangent. My drunk

brain only picked up on the last part, so I smiled. *Ehe heh heh. It seems I've successfully covered my tracks and changed the topic! Captain Kurtis even praised me!*

Ecstatic, I looked to Blue. "Blue, Kurtis just said I'm amazing! He praised me!"

For some reason however, Blue buried his face in his hands. "No, Fia, he's not praising you. He's being snide in a sarcastic way. And, Kurtis, I know full well how shoddy my excuse is. Please overlook it. Erm...right. Fia, the curse I have is the 'If you don't join a knight from the Kingdom on their journey to go meet their familiar, you won't find a spouse your whole life' curse..."

I thought it was odd how his voice gradually got quieter as he talked, but I paid that no mind. His words were just too shocking! I looked up at Kurtis and exclaimed, "I can't believe it! Blue's curse sounds almost exactly like the curse I told them I had when I was on an adventure with them!"

"Wow. That's...shoddy indeed," Kurtis said, exasperated.

Blue's body stiffened. With some resignation, Blue finally removed his hands from his face. Desperately, he began to speak, cheeks red and tears forming in his eyes. "Fia, the rest of the Empire and I are all but humble servants of the Goddess! I can imagine no possible joy greater than to accompany you under your command, so please allow me to join you on your trip to Blackpeak Mountain!"

"Huh?" I blinked a few times, bewildered by his request.

He looked at me with zeal in his eyes. "I want to undo my curse by joining you on your journey to meet your familiar! And, uhh... according to this one shaman I know, a failed attempt at undoing a curse can cause it to rebound even worse, which means I should undo my curse naturally if at all possible, so...you know..." By now, his voice was no more than a whisper.

He was acting a bit weird, but I considered his request anyway. "Uhh, you and Green are both pretty strong, so I'd be more than

happy to have you guys along, but my trip might take three or four or even five weeks. Will Red be okay managing the family business all alone for that long?”

“He’ll be fine!” Green and Blue both instantly responded.

Wow, they’re totally in sync. I blinked a few times, flummoxed by their utterly serious expressions. They were both absolutely willing to take an extra month of vacation without their older brother knowing. *Poor Red... Your brothers can be so irresponsible!*

Overwhelmed by their enthusiasm, I was about to tell them they could join us, when I realized I hadn’t asked Kurtis—who’d be joining me already—how he felt about it.

“I-Is that right? Well, I don’t see any particular problem with you two joining, but what do you think, Kurtis?”

“I’m fine with whatever you wish. I exist to grant your desires, after all...”

“Aw, thank you, Kurtis!” I loved how loyal he was, even after three hundred years.

Green and Blue bowed their heads toward him.

“Your kindness has not gone unnoticed.”

“Thank you, Kurtis! I swear to be Fia’s shield and protect her!”

They were so happy! *Wow, they were really eager to go on this trip.*

I had to wonder though, was it really all right for them to take an extra month of vacation and leave Red working by his lonesome? Didn’t they say they inherited their family business together? I knew Green and Blue were good-natured people, but I guess that didn’t make them lazy. *Oh well. I’m just happy I can go on another adventure with these two!*

That was when Green sighed. “On another note, Fia, you need to be more careful about what you say.”

“What do you mean?”

“Earlier, you said you hadn’t seen a curse you didn’t know how

to remove, but how am I even supposed to react to that information?! No—you know what? Don't say another word. You're drunk right now, there's no telling what bombshells you might drop on us. Do you always get so loose-lipped when you drink? You're usually more careful than this, right?" he asked, worried.

"No matter what happens," Kurtis cut in, "she'll be fine with me by her side. Lady Fi is many times more marvelous than the likes of you could ever imagine, so know your place and keep your distance from her."

Blue's head snapped to look at Kurtis. "I'm sorry, but I can't agree to that demand! Do you even understand how much she's done for us? She overturned our destiny! We had resolved ourselves to die with honor against that powerful monster, but she told us to raise our heads and fight instead! She taught us victory was earned by never giving up, no matter how strong the opponent or impossible the odds!"

"Ugh..." Kurtis groaned.

Blue's eyes gleamed as he spoke, passion plain in his voice. "I feel like I can take on the world when I'm with her. I'm able to block the fiercest of blows from improbable positions, and my attacks land with laughable ease. When I'm hurt, my wounds heal instantly. Even against a monster far more powerful than myself, I felt more confident in my victory than I'd ever been."

Kurtis buried his face in one of his hands. "Ugh, I can't believe this. You let him experience fighting with your powers, Lady Fi?! That's going too far..." He hung his head in defeat.

Green spoke next, as though to deliver the finishing blow to Kurtis. "After we defeated the monster, we were left in a daze at the feat we'd achieved, half-certain that it was a dream. But Fia simply fetched us water from the river, looking like she always did. I began to tremble then, understanding that our feat was nothing at all compared to the truly supreme being she was—and in the next moment, my

curse and Red's were gone, without warning, just like that. The very curses we had from birth, that we thought would be with us until the day we died, simply gone."

A single hand not enough, Kurtis brought the other one up too and buried his face in both hands. He groaned. "Agh...the more I hear, the more I understand I'm powerless to fix this. My only consolation is that I probably wouldn't have been able to stop her even if I had been there myself. It is simply her nature to help others, and who am I to stop that?" He lowered his hands from his face.

Green nodded deeply and spoke firmly. "Meeting Fia changed our destinies. She gave us a chance to regain our pride and face our future. It's thanks to her we're alive and can now shape the direction of the Empire."

Kurtis listened for a moment, then let out a resigned sigh. "I pray your fortune brings good to your people. The Empire is, well...it is the country...of the one...I respect the second-most in this world, so..." He looked up and chose his words carefully for once, speaking slowly.

There we go! The three men had found some common ground and were actually talking to each other. "Hee hee, see? I told you guys a friend of a friend is a friend!"

All of them looked at me, eyes wide, as though, after my long silence, they'd suddenly remembered I was there too.

"Perhaps through your rose-tinted glasses," said Kurtis, "we might seem friendly. Personally, I'd say that's a stretch."

"Just how simple a soul do you have to be to..." said Green. "No, what am I thinking? Your ability to interpret everything in a positive light is worthy of respect."

"You seem to have some rose-tinted glasses yourself, Brother!" said Blue. "Yours seem to show everything Fia does as a wonder, though."

See? I thought. Only friends would get along like this!

“Hee hee, I look forward to our trip tomorrow,” I said with a smile.

Blue perked up quickly at that. “Fia, I’ll definitely be useful to you this time!”

Green nodded in agreement. “Me too. I’ll show you I’m worthy of the duty you’ve granted me.”

Kurtis sighed, defeated. “You’ve been like this since forever ago, Lady Fi. You get caught up in trouble wherever you go, but people always gather around you, ready to help.”

The evening deepened into night as we enjoyed ourselves. Soon enough, the next day came, and the four of us set off for the Gazzar borderlands at the northern end of the Kingdom.

Chapter 34:

Gazzar Borderlands Part 1

“**J**UST OUT OF CURIOSITY, Fia...what’s that thing on your head supposed to be?” asked Green.

Five days have passed since we departed the Royal Capital. We were now at the entrance to the Gazzar borderlands, located at the foot of a mountain. I had just changed into my mountain climbing gear when Green called out to me.

I spun around proudly and boasted, “Heh heh heh! I just knew you’d ask! This is a hair accessory made from feathers taken from the proud familiar of Náv’s Monster Tamer Knight Brigade Captain! Ta-dah!” I tilted my head forward so he could get a good look.

The familiar in question was, of course, Quentin’s beloved griffon. I received some feathers it had molted off and made them into a hair accessory with my fantabulous needlework skills. I used three large, gold-colored feathers, and I dressed them with a ribbon to make an absolutely adorable work of art—so adorable, in fact, that I’d been eagerly awaiting a moment like this to show it off.

With some surprise, Green said, “Oh, it’s supposed to be a *hair accessory*! Huh...I guess fashion’s taken a weird turn these days? Ack, and I just bought my sister a more dated, modest-looking butterfly hair clip. Maybe that’ll just make her think I’m an out-of-style geezer...”

Kurtis glanced at the worried Green and calmly said, “I wouldn’t worry, Green. Your gift is a harmless one most would be happy with. Lady Fi’s hair accessory only works because of how wonderful she herself is. Nobody else could pull off such a look.”

Hmm? I’m being praised, but for some reason I feel like I’m being bad-mouthed. How perplexing.

“Thank you, Kurtis,” Green said a bit apologetically. “I do agree

with you, but at the same time, I feel like my sister would prefer to match with Fia. She has something of an abnormal fixation on her, you see.” He gave my hair accessory another long, hard look and said, “Then again, I feel like quite a few heads would turn if my sister wore this back home...”

Oh, I get it, mm-hmm. Golden feathers would draw quite a bit of attention. Understanding that, I presented an alternative. “In that case, how about I make a matching hair ornament for your sister if I ever find some more plain-looking feathers?”

“A hand-crafted present *made by you?! My sister would love that!* Even if you made her a hair accessory out of dead leaves, she’d probably be moved to tears! Oh—if anything, it’d be better if you made her something out of dead leaves. If you made her something *too special*, she’d probably die on the spot from sheer joy.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’m gonna go with dead leaves. They’d probably just crinkle apart if I tried to work with them,” I said, exasperated. It was clear he cared for his little sister, but the way he went about it was a bit odd. In what world would a young girl be happy to receive a hair accessory made of dead leaves?

With some envy, I thought of all my *own* older brothers. They hadn’t exactly been the greatest older siblings. Whether in this life or the last, my older brothers only ever saw me as an annoyance, so it was a bit of a surprise to see how Green and Blue doted on their little sister.

Heh heh, but I have the best older sister in the world, so all’s well that ends well!

We continued to chat back and forth as we steadily made our way along. In two days’ time, we crossed over two mountains. We ran into a number of monsters along the way, but my three companions dealt with those problems before I could ever draw my sword. I never even needed to heal anyone. That’s just how strong they were.

Around the time we'd departed the Royal Capital, Kurtis told me that Green and Blue had been convinced the curse that let me use saint powers had returned. I was a bit surprised to hear that, but Kurtis said it with such a straight face that I didn't think he could possibly be lying. Because of the alcohol I drank, I couldn't remember a single thing from our celebratory dinner—you know, like usual—but Kurtis being who he was, I could totally see him somehow convincing them that my "curse" had returned.

Phew! Nothing beats having capable allies by your side! Still, I hadn't had a chance to use my saint powers even once so far, let alone help them fight. Didn't that make me dead weight?!

Thinking those sad thoughts, I reached the stronghold of the Eleventh Knight Brigade.

The stronghold was a durable stone fortress surrounded by mountains and tall enough that you had to crane your neck up to look at it. There were a number of flags fluttering everywhere, depicting a black dragon on a red background; the place was unmistakably a Knight Brigade military base.

Suddenly filled with eagerness to see my sister, I hopped off my horse and ran up to the gatekeeper knights. As I was technically on duty during my stay here, I'd preemptively changed into my knight uniform. I thought that'd be enough to let the gatekeepers see I was a knight too, but for some reason they took one look at me and went wide-eyed.

Huh...?

I thought their behavior was strange, but I performed the knight salute and introduced myself anyway, as any good recruit should. "I'm Fia Ruud of the First Knight Brigade! I'm joined by Captain Kurtis of the Thirteenth Knight Brigade. We'll be in your care for a while."

"R-right, we heard Captain Kurtis would be visiting. You're, uh, how do I put it...pretty 'bold' to wear that hair accessory with your knight uniform. Is that the trend in the Capital these days?"

It appeared their surprise had been about my hair accessory. Understandable! It's pretty eye-catching stuff! *Heh heh heh, you guys have quite the eye for fashion! But no, this isn't a current trend. But it sure will be the trend soon!*

That's what I was about to reply with, at least, but the gatekeepers stiffened up before I could. Kurtis, Green, and Blue had appeared behind me. *Ah...those three are pretty big and intimidating, aren't they?*

Being outsiders, Green and Blue had volunteered to wait outside the stronghold, but Kurtis stubbornly opposed the idea. He insisted they allow themselves to be treated as honorary knights because it'd be inefficient to split up now when we'd be traveling together afterward anyway.

When they were still uncertain, he added: *"I understand you're hesitant to enter—you're both sharp-eyed and will get a picture of how our whole Knight Brigade works...but I'm fine with that. I honestly don't believe you will use what you learn against us."*

They were speechless upon hearing that. I watched the three of them talk warmly for a while, admiring how buddy-buddy they'd become, and eventually Green and Blue relented and agreed to Kurtis's suggestion that they be made honorary knights.

Honorary knights were what we called knights employed under nobles that were temporarily lent out to help the Kingdom's Knight Brigade. I was pretty sure Green and Blue were adventurers, but it looked like Kurtis wanted to give them temporary knight treatment or something? They certainly looked the part now—they'd each put on modest-looking vests that made them look less adventurer-y and more knightly.

Come to think of it, when we first met, they were in super fancy armor. They sure were a lot more knight-like then. I was convinced they were adventurers after seeing how rough-around-the-edges they acted, but what if...

My train of thought ended there—we'd passed through the gate, been led to a waiting room, and now I was hearing footsteps approaching. I leapt up from my seat right as a beautiful woman with dark brown hair opened the door.

"Oria!" With stars in my eyes, I ran up to my sister, who I hadn't seen since my coming-of-age ceremony.

She spread her arms wide as I approached. "I'm so happy you came all this way to see me, Fia! And you're a full-fledged knight now!"

I bounded into her arms, and she hugged me tight and smiled happily. "Oriaaaa! I've missed you!" I squeezed her back and smiled happily as well. We stayed like that for a while. Then I heard a murmur from the door.

"Whoa, Oria's incredible. She's got the Red Witch of Seduction completely wrapped around her finger."

"Whuh?" Feeling like I just heard myself get called something outrageous, I turned around and saw a suntanned man in a white knight uniform standing in the doorway. He was tall, with a nice physique and black-streaked blond hair that stuck up like a lion's mane.

Huh... I recognize that hair... I then looked down to the man's face and saw his masculine features and the gold color of his eyes. *Those eyes! This guy is—*

"The legendary demon, Guy Osbern!" I loudly exclaimed.



His eyes darted wide as he—Guy Osbern, captain of the Eleventh Knight Brigade—cried out, “How do you know my name?! You must really be a witch after all!”

“You’re acquainted with Captain Guy, Fia?” my sister asked, tilting her head to the side.

I didn’t hear her, though. I was too busy standing between her and Guy Osbern with my arms spread.

“D-demon! I know you must’ve fallen for my beautiful, kind, strong sister, but you can’t have her!”

My sister giggled at that. “Oh, are you protecting me, Fia? How sweet.”

In contrast, Guy went red in the face and began to stammer. “M-m-m-me, in l-l-l-l-love with Oria?! Wh-wh-what proof do you have?!”

“The way you’re flustered is proof enough,” Kurtis murmured with amusement from his seat. “You’re quite a few years past thirty, but Lady Fia’s guesswork has you as nervous as a teenager.”

Kurtis’ interjection made me confident that my guess had hit the mark. “You think so too, Kurtis?! Bah! Listen up, you mane-haired demon! I’ll never ever hand my sister over to someone like you!”

“Mane-haired demon...? Wait, I recall a certain brat calling me that before... That red hair... No way! Are you Fia?!” he said, half in doubt.

I screamed. “*Gyaaaaaah!* The demon said my name!”

“No, it’s me! Guy Osbern!”

“I know that! You’re Guy Osbern, the mane-haired demon!”

“I see you two *are* acquainted then,” said Oria. “You’re both proper adults though, so please reconcile whatever problems you

have. I don't want to waste a single second of my reunion with my little sister." She stepped between Guy and me as we glared each other down, then clapped her hands together. "Okay, time out!"

The clap returned the two of us to our senses. Surprised, we looked at her.

"Huh? O-Oria!"

"Oria?"

With an intimidating smile, she looked at Guy. "Captain Guy, would you mind telling me why it is that my sister seems to think you're a demon?"

"W-well..."

"Yes?"

"Th-that's all a misunderstanding on your sister's part!"

Oria narrowed her eyes disapprovingly.

Here's how Guy explained it: Around five years ago, when he was still only vice-captain of the Eleventh Knight Brigade, he'd visit neighboring areas to stretch his legs whenever he could scrounge up a few days' worth of vacation time. Coincidentally, the Eleventh Knight Brigade's stronghold and the Ruud territory were only a single day's journey apart by horse, so he'd sometimes visit. On his random visits to the Ruud territory, he often came across a red-haired girl. Being a well-built man with hair that stuck up, scary eyes, and an overall frightening appearance, the girl was fearful of him.

"Gyaaaaaah!" Like clockwork, she'd scream every time they met. For some strange reason, he figured it'd somehow be a good idea to go along with her terror and say he was a demon.

"Muha ha ha ha ha! Don't scream, child! For I am the legendary demon, Guy Osbern! If you scream again, I'll eat you up!"

"Eeeeeeeeeek!"

According to him, his hometown had a peculiar custom. Once a

year, adults dressed up as demons and tried to scare children. They thought that the louder the child screamed, the better their health would be that year. On his visits, he observed that the red-haired girl never improved in her swordsmanship and always lost to the local children. Feeling bad for her, he pretended to be a demon and made her cry as a way to comfort her—or so he claimed.

“So that’s how you came to bully my poor, poor, sister. You’re terrible. How could you do such a thing to someone so adorable?!” Oria said, glaring at Guy.

“I’m sorry. I am deeply ashamed of my own actions,” he said. He was on the floor now, sitting on his knees with his hands on his legs and his head hung sadly.

As for me, I was hiding behind my sister, peering out and glaring at the man.

Kurtis, Green, and Blue were enjoying some tea at a table nearby.

Oria complained to Guy for some time before finally taking a break, at which point Kurtis spoke up. “Are you finished now, Oria? If so, I’d like to have a few words with Guy as well.”

“Kurtis!” Guy looked up at Kurtis hopefully, thinking the man had come to his rescue. I had a feeling what was coming would be quite the opposite.

Kurtis knew I was killed by demons in my past life—or at least I was pretty sure he did. I never told him directly, but he seemed to know that I’d died in the Demon Lord’s castle, so it followed that he knew I was killed by demons. That’s why I figured he’d show no mercy to Guy now, knowing just what it meant for the man to pretend to be a demon in front of me...

I frowned, noticing that my hand was trembling. I didn’t feel any fear earlier because I’d been so focused on protecting my sister, but after understanding Guy wasn’t a real demon, my fear of *actual* demons had resurfaced. How pathetic of me. I clung to my sister from

behind and shuddered.

A pained look crossed Kurtis's face. "They say traumatic memories from youth stay with one for life. I can only imagine how terrified poor little Lady Fi must've been..." He looked at my sister. "Oria, please look after Lady Fi for a bit. Guy and I have some matters to discuss..." He glared at Guy. "I have to thoroughly explain to him just how heinous his actions were. My only concern is that his head might be too empty to grasp my words. Thankfully, I'm free until tomorrow morning."

Guy's eyes went wide. "What? B-but Kurtis, it's *morning* now! You're kidding, right? A captain like you must be too busy for something like this! H-hey, you're not seriously planning to lecture me for a full day, are you? O-okay, let's just calm down! I still haven't even heard why you're here, and you haven't even introduced those two suspicious guys that came with you!" Guy tried to argue his way out of it, but no dice. Even trying to distract Kurtis with business didn't work. Eventually, Kurtis got fed up, grabbed Guy by the collar, and dragged him out of the room.

But before he was out of the room, Kurtis—ever the gentleman—turned around and bowed to Oria and me. "Lady Fi, I apologize, but I just cannot bring myself to overlook Guy's unjust actions. Please spend the time until tomorrow morning enjoying yourself with your dear sister. Oh, and Oria? I hate to trouble you, but please provide these men with accommodations." He then proceeded to drag Guy, now flailing, out of the room.

Kurtis often failed to explain himself well, but I could tell he was being rough now for my sake, hauling the self-proclaimed "demon" quickly out of sight so I wouldn't be afraid anymore. He even made sure I'd be comforted by my sister's presence when he was gone.

I was probably the only person in the world who could understand his intent, even when he didn't outright state it. What a troublesome man he could be, seriously! Still, I had no problem indulging in his kindness, so I hugged my sister once again.

The fear that rode in on the word “demon” faded quickly. My hand continued to tremble for some time after Kurtis dragged Guy away, but Oria comforted me by sitting down, setting me on her knees, and giving me a hug. She was quite a bit taller than I was, so her hug reached around me entirely. She patted my head too, further helping me calm down. My trembles soon stopped, and I smiled happily.

She smiled as well. “You haven’t changed a bit since when you were a child, Fia. You rebound right away when I pat your head.”

She was right of course. I always felt happy and at ease when I was with her.

I clung to her, and she joked that I was like a big baby. After checking I had calmed, she looked at Green and Blue. “But I don’t know any baby that brings such an entourage of fine knights.”

The two righted their posture. I quickly got off her knees and straightened mine as well.

“Nice to meet you. I am Oria Ruud, a knight of the Kingdom.” She approached the brothers and held out a hand.

They promptly stood and each shook her hand in turn.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance, sister of Fia. I am Green. We will be acting as honorary knights for the duration of our stay here while we journey with Kurtis and Fia.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Blue. I am glad to see Fia’s sister is in such fine health and hope you will remain so for the time to come.”

Oria seemed happy with their firm handshakes but cocked her head at their greetings. “‘Sister of Fia,’ huh? I’ve never been addressed in such a way before. Is that all I amount to for you? How I relate to

Fia?"

"N-no, that's not what we meant at all!" they quickly said.

She paid them no mind, however, and proudly looked at me. "I'm impressed you managed to get such well-built knights so taken with you, Fia! You're a little on the smaller end, so I've always thought it'd be good for you to have someone bigger by your side."

"Aw, Oria!" I smiled—she really did care about my well-being.

She smiled back, then looked at Green and Blue. "Take care of her for me. She may not stand out much, but she's the kind of girl that never gives up no matter how many setbacks she runs into. She's wonderful, and I'm sure you two are yourselves wonderful enough to realize that." She giggled. "I'm glad my sister's worth is finally being recognized."

Hearing her heap on the excessive praise made me blush. "O-Oria! You don't need to exaggerate so much! Green and Blue have been on an adventure with me before, so they already know what I'm *actually* like!"

For once, Blue completely disregarded my words and totally agreed with my sister. "Miss Oria, we know full well that Fia is a wonderful person. Our only regret is that we know but a fragment of her wonderfulness. For sharing with us more insight on her brilliance, we thank you."

Well, isn't that kind of you, Blue. His reply was a bit odd, but Oria seemed happy enough with it, so...all's well that ends well, I guess?

With nothing left to say, the four of us left the room. Oria, back to her usual gentle self, showed us around the stronghold. Every knight we passed along the way made sure to greet her. *Yep, no surprise that my sister would be so popular!*

Our tour soon ended, and she asked the last knight we met to take care of Green and Blue. "These two will be staying with us as honorary knights for a few days. Please show them to a room."

There was nothing in particular I needed to do that day, so I

stuck to my sister the whole time. She was something of a busy bee, it seemed, and apparently an important one at that. Whenever she finished one task, another seemed to crop up for her. I could only help with half—or even half of half!—of her work, but she praised me happily anyway. And sticking with her all day also meant that I got to make friends with a lot of the knights in the stronghold.

At night we shared a bed. The two of us talked about how cute I used to be when I was little, how she looked after me, how we used to train together, how worried she was during my coming-of-age ceremony, and all kinds of stuff until I finally fell asleep.

The anxiety that had stirred in me ever since I saw Guy slowly faded as we talked, and I remembered that I was, indeed, none other than Fia Ruud. I had the memories of my past life now, as well as the saint powers that came with it, but they didn't define me. What shaped me was the past fifteen years I'd lived as the girl named Fia Ruud.

I was the girl who longed to be a knight and trained since youth for that purpose.

I was the girl loved by her big sister, Oria.

Yes...my past experiences in *this* life made me who I was now. But if I was to continue living as Fia Ruud, I needed to confront the trauma of my past life.

I curled into a ball, hugging myself inside my blanket and steadying my breathing.

It'll be fine. I'm safe now.

But would I be safe tomorrow? Would Oria be safe tomorrow?

No... I mustn't run...

I hugged myself tighter and let my mind fall back to the last moments of my past life. The moment I did, my heart began to race a mile a minute and I started to sweat. My body, which had been so calm and cozily warm after talking to my sister, now trembled fearfully. An ill, creeping chill clung to my body as it grew harder to

breathe.

I...I can't do it.

My body vehemently resisted my attempt to recall the Demon Lord's right-hand man. It was because of him that my past life's final moments remained a mess in my mind. What parts I could remember appeared to me as though through a veil of dim fog. But even so...

I brought my hands up to my mouth and clenched my chattering teeth together. Out of fear, my body was resisting my attempts to delve into my memories. The past me would have given up here in favor of freeing my body from the strain. But now—*no. I have to continue. I have to remember!*—a strong will rose within me, born from the bits of courage I received from everyone I'd met since I first remembered my past life.

I want to protect those who are dear to me.

I want to live with those I love for the time to come.

As though that push was all they needed, my memories gradually came unbundled and shone clear. Slowly, I came to remember the details I hadn't been able to recall when my memories first returned.

My mind went back to the moments before I encountered the Demon Lord's right-hand man, when my past life's three brothers and I were in the Demon Lord's castle.

Ah... I remember...

Clear as day, I saw before me the moments we fought the Demon Lord, and then the moment the battle was done.

What were the Demon Lord's final moments like? *I can do this. I remember.*

Were they collapsed on the ground, covered in their own blood? *No. No, the Demon Lord was nowhere to be found.*

But why? Why...?

My teeth began to chatter again. I couldn't stop my body from

trembling, no matter how hard I hugged myself. Through closed eyes, I saw clearly what I saw three hundred years ago. My brothers and me, covered in blood—and a box.

What's in the box?

A simple question with a simple answer. It took no effort to recall at this point.

Ah, that's right...

Three hundred years ago, I *sealed away* the Demon Lord.

I could see it now: a barren castle and an empty throne...my brothers celebrating...and in their hands, a box.

We sealed the Demon Lord away inside a box.

With the last bit of our strength, the last bit of our magic, we ran ourselves ragged to lock the Demon Lord away.

How could I forget?

We did not kill the Demon Lord all those years ago. We merely put a stop to him...

Now that I thought of it, the courage I mustered back when I first remembered my past was really something. I'd been killed by the Demon Lord's right-hand man, and, having remembered it in this life, I decided to live a life on the down-low, keeping my powers a secret until I had allies strong enough to help me.

More specifically, I'd thought to myself: *I'll find three swordsmen who are at least as strong as my three brothers from my past life. Until I find them and team up with them, I won't use my saint powers!*

In hindsight, I had to wonder...why in the world did I set such an unrealistic goal? I've lost any contracts I had with spirits from my past life, so I only had a tenth of my former healing magic power available to me now. Even if I did find three swordsmen on par with

my past life's brothers, my lack of power would likely cause us to fall short in a battle against the Demon Lord's right-hand man, and yet I had been so blindly courageous back then. I'd genuinely believed I stood a chance, despite how much I feared the right-hand man and my weakened powers.

I must've thought the right-hand man was far, far, weaker than the Demon Lord, perhaps because I couldn't recall how strong demons actually were. Or maybe I just wanted to optimistically believe there was hope for me if I could somehow find three people as strong as my brothers in my past life. How else could I have set such a senseless goal? Now, though, I could no longer believe that'd be enough...

Wide awake, I slowly propped myself up off the bed. Oria slept comfortably beside me. Keeping my eyes on her, I rose from the bed and walked to the window, taking care to be silent. I looked outside and saw the moon shining on the dark night.

Even after three hundred years, the moonlight remains the same. Seeing the familiar, unchanging celestial body calmed my heart. In silence, I gazed at the radiant moon and continued where my thoughts had left off.

How could I have overlooked something so important? When my memories first returned, I did recall the fact the Demon Lord was sealed and not killed. But I didn't stop to consider what that might have meant.

If all went well, the box the Demon Lord was sealed in should still be deep within the Cathedral, never to be unsealed...but no, I suspected that the Demon Lord's right-hand man seized the box before my brothers could leave the castle. There was simply no way he'd be so careless as to let his lord be taken away. And if he had taken the box...then surely, he must have unsealed it *sometime* in the past three hundred years. The Demon Lord's right-hand man was loyal to a fault and not the type to try and rule himself. He was the sort to find someone worth serving and do everything he could to place them on the throne. If we were to meet again, it would likely go down just

as it had before: First I would fight the Demon Lord, defeat them with every last bit of strength I had, and then the Demon Lord's right-hand man would appear again when I was weakened. The one who killed me those centuries ago...that's the sort of person they were.

Without a doubt, that sly, cunning demon still existed somewhere in this world. Because...because why wouldn't he?

I looked at my hands. They were beginning to tremble. I clenched them tight. A single question surfaced in my mind, and I had to fight to keep it around.

If...

If I were to remake a contract with a spirit and obtain the same saintly powers I had in my past life...

If I were to find three fighters of equal strength to my brothers...

Would I be able to defeat the Demon Lord and their right-hand man?

Too many unknowns. Too many what-ifs to know for sure. Still, my entire being immediately and vehemently shot down the idea. I could not imagine myself triumphing over the two, and not just because of the horrible end I'd met in my past life.

Before I realized it, my body was completely tense again. My heart was pounding faster than it ever had before, and my legs were trembling so hard it took effort to stand.

This fear...it'll probably never fade as long as the Demon Lord's right-hand man lives. And I see no world in which I can defeat him...

Somebody, anybody, please...

I'd thought that far when I suddenly felt my consciousness begin to fade. My field of vision began to constrict terribly fast, so I hurried over to the bed and collapsed atop the blanket.

This was probably some sort of defense mechanism. My body, in its hypertension, was forcing me to relax, to be lulled to sleep. Unable to resist, I let the bed take all my weight.

I felt my consciousness fall straight downward into darkness. My

mind was drifting off to the land of dreams, but before it could depart completely, a name escaped my lips. "...rius." I called his name as though calling for help, perhaps only because I was half-conscious now, moving between dream and reality. The name I whispered was that of a man no longer of this world, the captain of my Royal Guard and the strongest knight.

Chapter 35:

The Captain of the Royal Red Shield

(Three Hundred Years Ago)

SIRIUS, THE STAR that shines brightest in the night sky. All I needed to do was look up and I would see its overwhelming radiance there watching over me, wherever and whenever I was...

I, Serafina Náv, lived alone in a forest when I was young. There I remained until Sirius Ulysses, vice-commander of the Knight Brigade, came alone to take me out of the forest and return me to the Royal Capital. If anyone else had come, I probably wouldn't have gone. The forest had everything I wanted, after all, and I didn't yet know my role in the world.

Sirius swore to be my guardian and protect me from all things. He was the highest-ranking duke in the Kingdom and the son of the King's late younger brother. What was more, he was the vice-commander of the Knight Brigade and would almost certainly rise to the rank of commander one day. Despite his lofty positions, he never once mocked my forest-dwelling self for knowing nothing of the world. He was a busy man with important work to do, but somehow, he always found a way to put me first.

Two years passed since I returned to the Royal Capital, around the time I turned eight. Sirius was twenty-one now and had just been offered the role of commander come next spring. It was an honored position. It was generally given to royalty or nobles with royal blood, so not a single noble objected when Sirius—the son of the King's brother—was offered the position. No knight objected either, for Sirius was the strongest swordsman in the kingdom. Strength was a virtue to knights, so it was only fitting that the strongest knight stood at the top. The knights knew firsthand that nobody trained more than Sirius

—another reason for his overwhelming support.

That same Sirius, with his gray hair and silver eyes—both rare for the Kingdom—held his face close to mine and snarled, “Serafina, why have you gotten hurt again?! Do you not remember what I’ve told you?!”

Even at my young age, I could tell he was more handsome than most. But his handsomeness only served to make him more intimidating when his expression twisted into such a displeased visage. I could only presume he had come running after hearing I’d been hurt in that morning’s monster extermination expedition. Of course, I had since healed the wound without leaving a scar behind—I’d even changed my clothes—but still he glared at my right shoulder and gritted his teeth. He had been briefed on the details of my injury, it seemed.

His fierce glare was chilling, but I knew he only ever got angry out of worry for me, so I smiled. “Sirius, I discovered a sure-fire way to win battles!”

“You...what?” The scowl on his shapely face deepened, as if my words were lost on him.

Normally, I would try to calm him down first when he was worried for me, but I was too excited at the moment. “Really, really! I’m used to protecting myself when I fight, so whenever I have a split-second decision to make, I unconsciously default to casting Protection Magic on myself instead of my knights! But that’s wrong! From now on, I’m not going to protect myself. I’ll leave that to the knights.”

His eyes went wide with disbelief. “Are you stupid? You’re a *saint*! You’re the most fragile thing on the battlefield! It’s a given that you should protect yourself first!”

I saw the logic in his words, but I had to disagree. “But think about it. If my knights and I are ever attacked together, prioritizing my protection might cause the knights fighting on the front line to get injured!”

“As is their duty!”

He raised his voice, but I didn’t flinch and just cocked my head at him. “Well, that’s what you think as a knight. But as a saint, I believe it’s my job to make sure not a single one of my knights dies. Besides, I’m not saying I’d be defenseless, just that I’d leave my protection to my knights.”

“Look, I’ll admit this idea of yours has some potential, but it’s not something for you to test out personally! There’s no guarantee your knights will be able to protect you in the first place! In fact, you actually got injured today, did you not?!”

“But Sirius, this method is really hard to pull off. How many saints do you know that are good enough to test this method other than me?”

He fixed a fierce glare in my direction. “It’s rude to ask questions you already know the answer to! Zero, of course! No saint stronger than you exists in this world.” He continued to glare for some time. Eventually, however, he seemed to understand I wasn’t changing my mind anytime soon. “Fine. I understand you have your pride as a saint and want to protect your knights,” he relented. “*However*. As someone who leads knights, I also have my knightly pride. In exchange for allowing your behavior, you must allow me to assign you the most suitable knight possible to protect you. Understood?”

“Sirius!” Overjoyed, I ran up to him and hugged his stomach. Squeezing my arms around him tightly, I said, “Thank you! I just knew you’d understand!”

Sirius was the best! My brothers would have laughed and called my idea childish, but Sirius always made sure to at least hear me out. I looked at him, beaming, clueless as to what was coming...

The following afternoon, I was about to go out on a monster extermination expedition to test out the new strategy I had discussed...and was stunned to see Sirius waiting for me.

“Wh-wh-wha...S-Sirius?” There was much I wanted to say, but I could barely manage anything through my fluster. My mouth opened and closed like a beached fish.

Despite *definitely* knowing full well why I was so aghast, he asked, “Is something the matter?”

“I-Is something the—yes! Obviously yes! What in the world are you wearing?” I looked him up and down, blinking wildly. There was only one earnest thought parading through my mind: *Please, pleaaase let this be a joke!* To my horror, no matter how many times I blinked, his knight uniform stayed red.

No waaaaaay! I screamed internally.

The Náv Kingdom’s knight uniforms were supposed to be blue and white. Sirius was a vice-commander, a high-ranking position, so his uniform was a deeper blue and had some decorations to signify his rank—but it should still be blue and white. So why was his knight uniform *red*?

He’s not supposed to be wearing that. The red knight uniform belongs to the... My face tensed as I looked at Sirius in disbelief.

He opened his handsome lips and said the very words I didn’t want to hear. “As astute as you are, I’m sure you’ve figured it out already. Starting today, I will serve as captain of the Royal Red Shield, entrusted with the duty of protecting Your Highness Second Princess Serafina Náv.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?! You’re the vice-commander, aren’t you?!” I knew I didn’t mishear him, and I knew he wasn’t the type to joke around, but I just couldn’t believe it.

With an impassive look, he said something that made all else seem trivial in comparison. “I have resigned from the post of vice-commander as of yesterday. The Kingdom has already given its approval.”

“What?! Why?! You were going to become commander in the spring! There’s nobody who cares for our knights like you...nobody

with your kind of talent! Do you understand how big of a deal it is for you to lead the Brigades?! Why would you throw that all away?!"

Sirius was a busy man, but he still found time to be by my side. Because we spent so much time together, I knew well what he desired and strove for. I knew better than anyone that he loved the Knight Brigades above all else!

Despite all that, he met my eyes and shook his head. "You misunderstand. I didn't throw away the position of vice-commander. I rose to the position of captain of the Royal Red Shield. Our current commander will serve well for some time further. He's still only in his forties, after all."

The current commander had served well for quite some time, so I understood there was no issue with him remaining in the position—but that wasn't what I was taking issue with at all!

"Didn't you want to be commander, Sirius? Weren't all your years of effort for that singular purpose?!" I raised my voice, practically shouting.

Completely calm, he replied, "It was. However, I want to protect you. If you're going to put yourself in harm's way, it is my duty to stand at your side and keep you safe. I said it, didn't I? 'You must allow me to assign you the most suitable knight possible to protect you.' Can you name a knight more suitable than me?" As though getting his revenge in, he repeated what I'd said yesterday in the exact same tone. "Personally, I know none better with a sword, or anyone more willing to throw away everything to protect you. Or do you disagree?" He looked at me, patiently waiting for a response.

I fixed a fierce glare on him, looking like a mirror image of Sirius himself just the day before. "It's rude to ask questions you already know the answer to! Of course there's no knight more suitable than you! There's nobody but you who's so strong yet so stupid that he'd throw everything away for my sake!"

"I'd expect nothing less from the saint with crimson hair. You

catch on quickly,” he said with an amused grin. Then he laughed, as though to end the whole affair as nothing more than a funny tale he could recount later. He’d spent more than half of his twenty-one years of life hoping to one day lead the Knight Brigade, and yet he gave that all away like it was nothing, just to support my desire to better protect our knights.

But...no. No, this decision couldn’t have been “like nothing” to him. Sirius firmly believed a knight was not someone who made decisions lightly. He must’ve been deeply conflicted over his choice. And yet he showed me none of that anguish, instead looking as though he had risen above it all and was satisfied. His smile seemed to say he was happy just to be with me.

To such dedication, I could say only one thing.

“All right. In that case, I’ll become a saint greater than any other. That way you, who serve by my side, will become someone more accomplished and respected than any other commander.”

His eyes grew wide with surprise. Half-directed to himself, he muttered, “That’s quite the goal. I wonder, just how proud would I be if you were to become the greatest saint of them all?”

“Really, really, proud, of course!” I exclaimed. “After all, you’re now the captain of my Royal Guard, so it’d be your achievement to share.”

He gave me a funny look. “So...it’s all for me? Ha ha! You’re the one who’d be worshipped, you know? Oh, whatever. I’m looking forward to it, future great saint.”

His eyes narrowed as his lips curled into a happy smile...

My heart ached as I recalled Sirius’s smile.

Ah...Sirius.

You always, always put me first.

You changed the direction of your whole life just to protect me.

You always listened to what I had to say and stayed with me.

That's why...I can't help but think of you always, both in good times and bad...

Chapter 36:

Gazzar Borderlands Part 2

WHEN I AWOKE the next morning, my sister was looking at me with some worry. “Oh, dear. You don’t look too great, Fia. Did you not sleep well? I thought you were the kind of girl to sleep like a baby no matter where you were, but maybe not.”

“No, I slept, but...I had a nostalgic dream of the past and...” My voice trailed off drowsily.

She laughed. “Well, we *were* talking about when you were little before bed last night. Was it a nice dream?”

“Huh?” I took a moment to think. *Was it? It had to have been. I don’t have a single bad memory of Sirius, after all.*

I was about to answer, but I felt like something would overflow from inside me if I did, so I just nodded silently.

After looking at my face, she patted my head and left the room without a word.

I heard the door shut and let out a sigh. I must’ve been really shaken if I was remembering somebody long departed for comfort. I had made it this far without thinking of him too...

I lifted my upper body off the bed, rested my chin on my raised knees, and thought back on my past life as though continuing my dream.

Would things have ended differently at the Demon Lord’s castle if I were joined not by my brothers but by Sirius, Canopus, and the White Knight instead? I soon abandoned the thought. There was no way of knowing now, no matter what I did.

I shook my head as if to shake off that mood, then leapt from the bed. I briskly walked over to the corner where my things were kept and began changing my clothes.

Oh...but maybe... If I were to somehow find knights of Sirius's strength and gain the power of spirits again, perhaps I'd be brave enough to face the Demon Lord's right-hand man. Still, it'd be a tall order to find knights of Sirius's caliber. The knights of this time were generally weaker than those from three hundred years ago, of whom Sirius was far and away the strongest. *So...maybe not...*

I sighed and thought back to the time three hundred years ago when I'd returned from Sutherland to the Royal Capital. Back then, I'd neglected my duty to go to the Barbizet duchy and do some monster exterminating. To make up for my absence, I had intended to send over a number of knights, but it seemed that my instructions weren't very clear—instead, the majority of my knights came to Sutherland with me, leaving Barbizet lacking manpower. Sirius, having heard of me abandoning my duty, then arrived in Barbizet to make up for the deficit. He made quick work of the four blue dragons that appeared there, each one five meters tall.

He's just as strong as Zavilia, I thought. Knights as monstrously strong as Sirius didn't just appear out of thin air. Training the knights I already knew to reach his level was a possibility, but how do you train someone to the level of a literal legendary monster?

Back to square one... I didn't know why, but the Demon Lord and their right-hand man hadn't made any appearances in modern times. For the time being, I could avoid using the power of spirits to hide the fact I was a saint, but the demons were sure to eventually reappear one day. I needed to figure out what I would do when that happened. How would I protect the life I had now, as Fia Ruud? How would I protect Oria, Kurtis, and all the other Knight Brigade members I'd grown so close to? What could I do? I didn't have any answers yet, but I would keep thinking on it. I would not run away from my fears. I had to do what I could.

Things were different now, anyway—unlike in my last life when the Demon Lord's right-hand man appeared before me without warning, I knew who my enemy was. *Let's do this!*

“I’m going to give today my all!” I shouted, just as my sister returned.

She looked at me and smiled. “Hee hee. Seeing you so cheerful has me feeling the same.”

She handed me a cup of water. I accepted it with both hands and drank, tasting a hint of citrus. My sister, knowing just what I liked, had added a slice of fruit to the water.

Oria...you always look after me as though it were nothing. It’s only fair that I try my best for your sake too.

Together, we left her room. First, we went to the cafeteria and ate breakfast while mingling with the other knights. Then we went to a meeting room and met up with the same group from the day before.

Perhaps it was because it had been so long since our group had slept in beds, but everyone else seemed to look more well rested than usual...except for Captain Guy, sitting in the middle.

“Oh my. Captain Guy, you look pale! Did Captain Kurtis keep you up all night?” Oria said.

In a listless voice, Guy replied, “*Oriaaa*, don’t make it sound like Kurtis and I were doing something scandalous *togetherrrr*. You’re right, though. He didn’t let me *sleeeeeep*.”

“Err...why are you talking like that, Captain?” she asked, scowling.

With an exhausted look and the same listless voice, he replied, “I’m just trying to show everyone how horrible Kurtis was to me. Look, *looooooook*! My brilliant brain is putty after being scolded by Kurtis for a whole *nniiiiight*!”

“Cut that out, or I’ll apply for a transfer,” she said in a low tone—it looked like she knew he was just messing around.

He quickly straightened his back. “I was just kidding, of course!” he said sharply. “A brain as brilliant as mine could never be harmed by the likes of Kurtis! Now, let’s have ourselves yet another jolly good

day of working together, Oria!”

“It seems you’ve suffered brain damage after all. You appear to be under the impression that we work together regularly, but I’ve hardly exchanged more than a greeting with you.”

“Th-that’s true, but...but...can you blame me for wanting to try and show off a little?! Your little sister, true to her title as the Red Witch of Seduction, brought only handsome men with her! You can’t find a single man that good-looking in this stronghold! Can you really blame me for wanting to show off around them?!”

To his long excuse, my sister offered a few short words of comfort. “Captain, it’s all right. There’s more to men than just their looks.”

“Guh?!” He slammed his head onto the table. “You might as well have just said I’m ugly!”

I looked back and forth between the two. *Huh? Maybe they’re actually kind of a good fit for one another...?*

Guy clearly had feelings for my strong, kind, beautiful, smart sister, but she didn’t seem particularly interested in him. She was good at looking after others, though, so I’d always thought a man who was a handful would be perfect for her. Guy seemed like a massive handful, so maybe he actually had a chance with her. The only problem was that he might’ve been *too* much of a handful, coming off more as an annoyance...

As I mused on this, my sister and I approached the table. Kurtis stood up and moved briskly to pull a chair out for me to sit. Just after I thanked him and sat, Blue immediately served me a glass of something nice-smelling. He served Oria as well, of course, but only after serving me...which was odd, because I was further away. I’m sure Guy and Oria noticed that.

Nobody said a word, but I could *feel* Guy’s and Oria’s stares on me. I kept my head down and pretended like I didn’t notice them, hoping they’d just let it pass, but Guy didn’t seem to pick up on my

wishes.

With astonishment, he exclaimed, “Wow, you’re not the Red Witch of Seduction for nothing! Look at you, with all these handsome men at your beck and call!”

Kurtis had been quiet up till then, but the vein on his forehead sure was starting to bulge.

“‘Red Witch of Seduction’?” Kurtis repeated. Something was clearly off about his tone.

“Eek!” Guy, having spent some time getting to know Kurtis since the previous morning, picked up on Kurtis’s change in mood. He bolted out of his chair and clamped his mouth shut.

Sadly, it seemed Kurtis didn’t have mercy to spare. He thrust three fingers in front of Guy’s face. “That makes three times.”

“I-I’m sorry?”

“That makes three times since yesterday that you’ve said ‘Red Witch of Seduction.’ I looked the other way twice on account of your meager brains, but thrice is enough. Would you be so kind as to enlighten me who this ‘Red Witch of Seduction’ refers to?”

Guy drew back from Kurtis’s fingers and waved his hands in a panic as he tried to explain himself. “Y-you misunderstand! I’m just repeating what I heard verbatim! That nickname is something I picked up when collecting information as Captain!”

“And whose nickname would that be?”

“That’s, well...hear me out first! The truth is, I have a weird trait that makes it *sound* like I’m ragging on somebody whenever I repeat a rumor, even if I repeat it exactly as I heard it! I need you to understand—no matter how awful what I’m about to say sounds, it’s not my fault! Moreover, this is only something I heard secondhand

anyway! I didn't come up with a word of this!"

Kurtis scowled. "I'll decide where the blame lies after I hear what you have to say."

Guy seemed to have a lump stuck in his throat. For a while, he said nothing at all. Eventually, though, he seemed to catch on that Kurtis wasn't going to let up, no matter what he tried.

"The Red Witch of Seduction," he said hesitantly, "refers to an evil girl with beguiling red hair who has men wrapped around her finger—in other words...none other than Fia Ruud!"

"Hwuh? M-me?!" Surprised, I got up out of my chair. *Wh-what?! But I've never once 'wrapped a man around my finger!' Not ever! I've been super unpopular with men in both my lives?! If anything, I'd like to ask this 'Red Witch' for some pointers!*

But...wait a minute, why am I taking his words at face value? Fia, you idiot! He's totally doing that sarcasm thing! Completely convinced I was right, I aired my grievances to Kurtis.

"K-Kurtis, he's being sarcastic! He said all that while knowing full well how unpopular I am! I'm sure somebody *popular* could just laugh it off as a joke, but I'm hurt! Scold him for me!"

Kurtis gave me a terribly weary look and pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose, exhausted.

Huh? What's that look for? Is he sympathizing with my plight? Grrr! That darn Captain Guy, why'd he have to go and bring up my unpopularity? It's humiliating! Miffed, I glared at Guy.

He paid me no mind, however, and continued explaining. "Er, to continue where I left off, Fia earned herself that nickname because of her grand seduction of the proud captains of our Knight Brigade! First Knight Brigade Captain Cyril, Second Knight Brigade Captain Desmond, Third Mage Knight Brigade Captain Enoch, Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade Captain Quentin, Sixth Knight Brigade Captain Zackary—all these men in the Royal Capital have fallen victim to her feminine wiles!"

After hearing him list off some names, I was all the more convinced he was being sarcastic. Cyril scolded me practically 24/7. Desmond only ever teased or vented his frustration at working overtime on me. I've never even heard Enoch speak, ever! Quentin was obsessed with everything about familiars, so he only ever came to me to talk about Zavilia. Zackary was strangely dead set on teaching me some ab muscle workout, so our interactions were mostly me making excuses to leave. In what possible way had I seduced any of them?! If anything, I was *their* victim!

I made my glare on Guy even fiercer, but he still paid me no mind as he went on. "What's more, these are all men who have—until now—had no interest in women. Respectively, they're: a reticent and high-ranking noble, a woman hater, a man with eyes for nothing but magic, a man with eyes for nothing but familiars, and a muscle fanatic! Only a *witch* could possibly win over these men!"

"Enough! My relationship with them is that of superior and subordinate—and *nothing more!*" I waved my hands wildly, protesting as hard as I could.

How could anyone believe something so baseless? Sheesh, rumors are scary. And he's saying this all in front of Oria?! What if she gets the wrong idea about me from all this, Guy?!

Guy didn't seem to believe me, however. He just turned his head away. "You can't fool me that easily! If you're so innocent, then I'm sure you won't mind answering a few questions of mine!"

"Bring it! I haven't done a single thing wrong, and I can prove it!" I said confidently, clenching my fists.

"For starters then..." he began. "Is it true that Cyril fought over you with Quentin and Zackary during the captains' meeting and that even Commander Saviz was in attendance?"

"Huh?!" Completely blindsided by the question, I blinked a few times. I tried my darndest to recall the incident in question. "Th—that's...not quite right! They weren't 'fighting over me,' just arguing

over who I would stay with! They were just uh...feeling lonely or something! Probably!”

I put on a nice smile, trying to look as convincing as possible. I knew my excuse sounded flimsy at best, though. *Something's wrong, I can feel it...*

I could recall the captains' meeting and was certain nothing illicit went on like Guy was claiming, but I couldn't find a compelling argument against it.

Guy nodded as though satisfied by my answer, then asked his next question. “I've heard Desmond always ensures he has time to play chess with you, despite the fact that he's constantly swamped to death with work. I've even heard he's taken the effort to memorize your training schedule to wait for you. Is this true?”

This question was a lot easier to answer than the last. I relaxed my face and, a bit firmly, replied, “It is true, but Captain Desmond just really, really likes chess! We happen to be around the same level, so we play together a lot. That's all.”

Guy raised an eyebrow. “Wait, are you really that good at chess?”

“What do you mean?”

“Desmond's won the chess portion of the Inter-Brigade Contest for two years running.”

“Buh?”

“If you've won, he's probably just being nice to you. In other words, Desmond—a man known for his ruthlessness—is willing to lose on purpose just to make you happy... How interesting.”

“Uh...” I was stunned silent by the unexpected revelation.

He continued without waiting for me, this time bringing up Enoch. “Is it true that Enoch, a man as silent as they come and known for only having an interest in magic, visited your room at a very late hour to give you a present?”

“Huh? No way, that never happened! I’ve never even talked to…” My voice trailed off, despite my confident start. The last word Guy said—*present*—bothered me. With apprehension, I asked, “Uh, would you happen to know the date this present was supposedly given?”

He shot me a mortified look. “Does the Red Witch get so many presents that she can’t be bothered to remember when she received each and every one? As it so happens, I *do* know when it was given: the night you returned from Sutherland. Enoch was so eager to hand over his present, he forced his way into your room. Or so I hear.”

“Uh-huh…”

Ah. That solves that mystery. The morning after I had returned from Sutherland, I woke up to find a magic item I’ve never seen before on my desk. I hadn’t had a clue where it came from, so I just stashed it away somewhere in my room. *Huh. So that was from Captain Enoch.*

Come to think of it, Enoch was there that night when I drank in the captain and vice-captain recreation room with Quentin and Zackary. My memory was fuzzy because of the alcohol, but maybe I’d talked with him then? Actually, I gave all three captains my gifts from Sutherland while I was in there, so wouldn’t it make sense for the magic item to be a gift from Enoch in return?

I had finally tied the loose threads together, but it seemed Guy was already moving on. He gave another satisfied nod before taking another swing at me. “Is it true Quentin once tried to give you his full salary on payday?”

Instantly, I felt cornered. There was no world in which a captain offering a new recruit their full salary was normal. The worst of it was the fact that this event *had* indeed transpired, so I couldn’t just pretend otherwise.

I tried to come up with an excuse, but nothing came to mind. Thinking I had to do *something* to get out of the hot water I was in, I said, “W-well, th-that question is… it’s biased! If you asked me

whether I had *accepted* his money, I would've said no! But, uh, as for whether or not Captain Quentin *offered* me his full pay...there is a possibility that he maybe might have?"

Once again, Guy nodded with satisfaction. "One last question: Is it true you made that musclehead Zackary swear to never talk about muscles again?"

"That's, w-well...okay, technically, sure! But what's that even have to do with all this nonsense of me being a seductress?!" I exclaimed, thinking I was making a fairly good point.

Guy squinted at me suspiciously. "Oh, it's got *everything* to do with it. And from what I've heard, you're as guilty as they come! Anybody would agree that you're a witch, through and through! Or can you prove you're not? Well?!"

"H-how do you define 'witch,' anyway?" I shot back, flustered by his sudden intensity. "I-If you're asking whether I'm a woman who can use attack magic, then no, I am not a witch!"

"It's not just attack magic! While rare, there are some people with special kinds of magic, including *charm* magic! All women who can use any magic at all are collectively called witches!"

"A-any magic, you say?!"

Wait, wait, wait—doesn't all magic include healing magic?! Doesn't that totally make me a witch?!

Seeing that I was lost for words, Kurtis stepped in to help. "Lady Fi, you needn't play along with Guy's flights of fancy. You are, of course, not a witch—nor have you ever seduced anyone."

"Y-yeah, that's right!" I looked at Kurtis and smiled, grateful for my savior in my time of need.

That was when I heard Guy mutter, "You *would* say that Kurtis. You've already fallen into her clutches."

I glared at him. *How distrusting can a captain get?! If Kurtis says I'm not a witch, then I'm not a witch! How hard is that to understand!*

“Guy, while I did ask you to explain what ‘Red Witch of Seduction’ meant,” said Kurtis sharply, “your response wasn’t what I was looking for. It would seem you didn’t understand a single thing I spent all of yesterday trying to explain to you. Now, what *did* I want you to do? Well, Guy?”

Guy went wide-eyed. “O-oh, right! F-Fia, allow me to apologize to you!” Completely disregarding everything he’d just said, he deeply bowed his head.

“Huh? Um, what?” The sudden shift from interrogator to apologetic made me blink a few times in confusion. “Captain Guy?” I called his name, but he didn’t lift his head. I looked around myself, confused as to what to do. I first met eyes with Green and Blue. I was about to beckon them over and implore the help of the surely more world-wise pair, but before I could, I heard Blue murmur.

“Incredible. I’d expect no less from the Goddess of Creation herself. She has captivated the hearts of many high-ranking knights in only four short months since joining her Kingdom’s knight brigades. I understand the feeling quite well myself, being entranced with her gallant, benevolent self too.”

“Huh?” It seemed listening to Guy had thrown Blue’s thoughts for a loop. I thought Blue was one of the more sensible men around, but he had a look of rapture on his face now and was spouting nonsense just as mystifying as Guy’s.

I let my gaze wander again and this time saw Oria, whose eyes were practically saucers. “O-Oria!” I said quickly, “this isn’t what you think! Captain Guy was just, uh...”

With a troubled look, she said, “Fia, I’ve heard rumors about you as well, but nothing nearly as bad as what Captain Guy brought up. I guess it just goes to show that rumors only get more and more exaggerated as they’re passed around.”

“Oria!” I exclaimed with glee. I just *knew* she was too smart and kind to believe Guy’s baseless claims. I was about to leap into her

arms out of sheer joy when I saw Kurtis grab Guy's collar out of the corner of my eye.

Isn't that a bit violent? I thought as I looked at Kurtis.

"Yes, Guy, *this* was what I wanted," he admonished. "You were meant to begin by apologizing."

"R-right! My bad!" Holding his head higher than he probably should've, Guy apologized without a hint of repentance.

As though suffering a headache, Kurtis pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. "Your reply was satisfactory, but I don't think you understand my point. Was the time I spent with you yesterday a waste?"

"W-well—"

Frowning, Kurtis silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"I understand. My methods were wrong. I should've made things simpler for you. Listen carefully, Guy: Lady Fi is Oria's younger sister. As a member of Oria's family, Lady Fi deserves your respect. Am I clear?"

"Crystal!" As though having finally grasped a long-elusive truth of the world, Guy beamed triumphantly.

Kurtis looked at him coldly and sighed. As if to announce he was done with the man, he turned to me. "I am sorry to have allowed you to suffer such displeasure, Lady Fi. Guy is not a wicked man at heart, just...impulsive and a bit lacking in thoughtfulness and imagination."

"H-hey, are you trash-talking me, Kurtis?!" Guy said. "And right in front of me too! What's with that?!"

"It's simple. When one reaches the rank of captain, it becomes difficult for others to admonish improper behavior or identify faults. Most captains have no problem with this, as they possess self-discipline. But I've concluded that you're the type who needs to be 'advised' every now and then."

"Oh, I see. So you're trash-talking me for my own sake! Thank

you.” Guy gave Kurtis a wide smile.

Kurtis shrugged his shoulders. “As you can see, Lady Fi, Guy is not an ill-natured man. Given thoughtful assistance, he may serve as a splendid captain.”

“I...I see.” I nodded along, more or less understanding how Guy was handled around here.

Guy frowned, regarding Kurtis with some suspicion. “You’ve changed, Kurtis. You’ve always been courteous, but you’ve never been this over-accommodating—and only to Fia, of all people. Does she have some super bad dirt she’s blackmailing you with or somethin’?”

Oria looked over as well, curious.

Ah! Come to think of it... I’d gotten so used to that kind of thing back in the Royal Capital, but it was weird for a captain like Kurtis to act this way to an ordinary knight like me. In the Royal Capital, Quentin and a number of other captains acted differently around me, so people just began to accept that as the new normal—but there was, in fact, nothing normal about it.

What excuse should I make to explain my way out of this? Before I could say anything, however, Kurtis beat me to the punch.

“As you know, I was appointed to Sutherland as Thirteenth Knight Brigade Captain.”

“Huh? Uh, right,” Guy responded, confused by the sudden non sequitur.

“In Sutherland, the red-haired, golden-eyed image of Her Holiness the Great Saint is worshipped. Lady Fi visited Sutherland to attend a ceremony, was spotted by the locals, and was accepted with open arms.”

“Ah, I see. Now that you mention it, Fia’s hair is redder than any saints’ I’ve seen before. So she was made a guest of honor because of her hair and eye color, huh?” Guy said with an understanding nod.

“Indeed. And as she departed Sutherland, the people requested I

stay with her as protector—therefore, I remain by her side. In deference to the people of Sutherland, I treat her as though she were the Great Saint herself.”

“Ahh, I get it now. So basically, Fia is the Great Saint to you! Yeah, that would explain why you’re acting so darn polite with her!” Guy said with an amused grin.

In contrast, I was breaking out in a cold sweat. Hearing the words ‘Fia is the Great Saint,’ even when not said in earnest, spooked me. *Does this man have the intuition of a wild beast?!* I thought, staring at Guy in disbelief.

Kurtis began to change the topic. “I hope this clears your suspicions. My behavior toward Lady Fi is not due to her winning me over romantically or anything of that sort. Similarly, Cyril and the other captains have their own perfectly reasonable motivations for their treatment of her. Now that we’re clear on that, *do* take care to treat Lady Fi with the respect she deserves from here on out.”

“O-oh, yeah! Sure thing!”

Kurtis gave a short, sharp nod. “Now then, let’s get down to business. The main purpose of our visit was to bring Fia to meet her sister, Oria, but—seeing as we’d be in the area—we were also given a task by Cyril. I believe we’re wanted as reinforcements to help with the monsters that have been running amok in the area lately, correct?”

“That’s right!” Guy replied. “It’s been utter chaos ever since the Black King returned to Blackpeak Mountain! He’s been making the rounds and asserting his presence, causing mayhem. We don’t know why he’s abruptly changed from his old, independent behavior, but all the monsters’ territories are a mess because of it!”

“So, what’s the problem?” Kurtis said, as if clueless.

Guy roughly scratched the back of his head. “Okay, so, Blackpeak has been the nest of the Black King since waaay back. The whole huge mountain is under the King’s control, and no other dragon has been allowed to fly over it—not ever! But things changed recently.

After the King was reborn as an infant, disappeared, and then reappeared three months ago, other dragons have been seen in his territory as though they were invited! Can you believe it?! There are blue dragons and red dragons flying above Blackpeak now!”

“I see.”

“Do you really? Am I getting through to you just how much of a disaster this is?! We have our hands full just dealing with the monsters fleeing the mountain! We can’t even spare a single team to go look into what the hell is going on over there!”

Much more calmly than Guy, Kurtis replied, “Ah...I believe we could be of some service there.”

Guy frowned. “What was that?”

Still completely composed, Kurtis continued, “Fia and I, as well as Green and Blue, will venture to Blackpeak Mountain for you.”

“Huh?” Guy stared at him as though he couldn’t believe his ears.

“You can’t be serious!” Guy exclaimed with disbelief. “Have you not heard a single word I said? The Black King has returned to Blackpeak Mountain! He’s been reborn stronger and more cunning than before! He’s gathering other dragons for some unknown reason, and the other monsters—strong and weak alike—are being driven off the mountain! The place is a deathtrap!”

“Perhaps. But think about it—do you really think Cyril would send me here just to relay information? You heard the report yourself yesterday, but it wasn’t something a man of my rank was needed for at all. What’s more, he explicitly said we were to act as *we saw fit* instead of following your command. Only a fool would think he wanted me to act merely as reinforcements for you.” With eloquence, Kurtis presented a plausible case as fact.

Guy folded his arms, unconvinced. “No, that can’t be right. Cyril is too sensible for that. He wouldn’t order someone to go to Blackpeak. It’s practically suicide!”

Kurtis met Guy’s eyes directly. “For a simpleton,” he muttered, “you sure understand people well...”

“Sorry, what was that?”

“Nothing, I was just talking to myself. I appreciate your personal opinion on this matter, but seeing as I’ve been permitted to act as I see fit, I shall do as I please. I’m sure you have no objections; it’s not as if I’ll be borrowing your knights, after all.”

Guy gave Kurtis a long, hard look. “Look, Kurtis, I can see you’ve put on some muscle since I last saw you, but this is the Black King you’re up against here. Quentin may have made the journey to Blackpeak half a year ago in search of the King, but he had around a hundred of his knights and their familiars with him, as well as many of my knights to help with all the monsters they were unfamiliar with.” He paused, and his look turned into a sharp glare. “We failed to meet the King then, but a single expedition still required that much manpower. Things are even worse there now—the King is actually present, and a number of other dragons have settled in there too! Do you understand what you’re getting into?!” Guy was shouting by the end. Together with his flared-out hair and naturally scary eyes, he looked furious.

But Kurtis simply raised a hand as though to soothe the man’s worry. “Your concern is justified. Unlike Quentin, however, I am not going to the mountain with the goal of capturing the King but for rather more peaceful reasons.”

“I doubt that’ll matter. This is the cunning, battle-hardened Black King we’re talking about, you know? I can’t see any reason why it wouldn’t attack you all on sight,” Guy said, as though trying to explain something to a child.

Huh? Are we talking about the same Black King here? I couldn’t

help but tilt my head in wonder. I knew the Black King had to refer to Zavilia, but it felt like Guy was describing a completely different person. Sure, Zavilia had been a little rude when talking to Quentin and Gideon, but he was a good little boy at heart! Why was Guy talking about him like he were some tyrannical monster that couldn't listen to reason? The information Guy got out here must be terribly exaggerated somehow—a problem I suffered from firsthand a few moments ago with the whole “Red Witch of Seduction” debacle. *Oh, Zavilia, you poor thing! They're making you out as some soulless, tyrannical monster!*

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. “We'll be okay, Captain Guy. If things look dangerous, we'll pull back. I really want to see the place where my sister works myself, you see. But if she joins us, I just know she'll be so overprotective of me that I won't get the genuine Blackpeak Mountain experience. That's why I'm thinking it's best if we go without any local knight's help.”

“Oh, not you too, Fia!” Guy groaned. “Why are all you Royal Capital folks so reckless? Where do you get all your blind confidence from?! Oria! Please, talk your sister out of this!”

But Oria smiled cheerfully. “The Black King and Fia, huh? Interesting. They might actually be pretty compatible. I doubt the Black King would be hostile to Fia, and the whole mountain is under the King's control. She should be fine.”

“What?!” Guy's jaw dropped. He couldn't believe what he was hearing from Oria, the bastion of common sense.

Ah, that's right! I'd forgotten, but Oria already knew I'd made a familiar pact with Zavilia during my coming-of-age ceremony. Plus, she might worry for me a lot, but she also encouraged me to challenge myself...within reason. I wasn't surprised to see I had her approval. *My sister's the best!*

In disbelief, Guy exclaimed, “So it's come to this! Oria is so doting on her little sister that she's lost sight of reality! But it's okay,

Oria! I'll join your sister and protect her for you!"

"What?!" everyone else said in unison.

Oria snapped back at once. "Save the boasts for the barroom! Your schedule for the entirety of today *and* tomorrow is packed to the brim! You have no time to be going anywhere! Fia's in the hands of three splendid knights already, so there's no need for you."

Guy bolted to his feet and, with complete seriousness, asked, "But let's say your sister got in a pinch and I saved her—that'd be cool, right? You'd think I was cool for it?!"

She crossed her arms, thinking. "That's a hard one. I'd be grateful if something like that happened, but would I think of *you* as cool for it? Perhaps."

"Wh-wha?! I-Is it my face? Am I that lacking in the attractiveness department?! Oria! All that matters in the end is raw strength! Things like looks are only so important!"

"Wow...I'm reminded yet again just how broad-minded the previous captain was to put forth Captain Guy as their recommendation." Oria sighed, then ignored Guy and turned to smile knowingly at me. With a giggle, she said, "I know exactly what you came for, Fia. I'm sure you came to visit me too, but you also want to go meet that cute 'King' of yours, right? Just remember: While he may be nothing more than a darling little thing for you, he's the absolute ruler of all the monsters in the area. Incidentally, do you think you could ask him not to be too wild? For me?"

Naturally, I'd never even think to say no to one of her requests. "Of course, Oria!"

Afterward, we nailed down our plan together. Put simply—Kurtis, Green, Blue, and I would go investigate Blackpeak Mountain. If we didn't return within a week, Guy would arrange a search party.

With that settled, we quickly prepared and left the stronghold on horseback before noon. We departed for Blackpeak Mountain in high spirits, but as I gazed at the imposing mountain from afar, I felt a chill

run down my spine. The mountain was covered in greenery here and there, but the majority of its face was craggy, bare rock, as though the woodlands had been scraped clean off the surface. True to its name, the color of the rocky surfaces was black, different from the mountains around it. Looking at the distant black surface contrasted by greenery, I felt an instinctual fear.

In nature, black was a special color...a color of warning. It said: *"Stay away—this one is overwhelmingly superior to you."* While some creatures used color to deter predators—by signaling one was toxic or by hiding, to name some examples—black was used by predators to *deter bothersome prey.*

Only a few beings were permitted the color. This world had no birds that were black. The only winged creature with the color was the black dragon.

And what of land creatures? The demon race, powerful beings with black hair and black eyes, came to mind. As a race, demons were, in fact, the only land beings who had any black on their bodies, by definition. There were monsters other than the black dragon that had the color, but they were all individuals who had evolved past their own species through some means.

A thought flitted through my mind then. Out loud, I mused, "Oh, yeah... Come to think of it, Commander Saviz has totally black hair and eyes..."

Quentin had black hair, but part of it was brownish, and his eyes were a lighter color. Guy only had black streaks in otherwise blond hair...

"Hmm?" I cocked my head far to the side, about to stumble upon some realization or another...but in the end, that realization never came, so I instead came to a different, but still completely reasonable, conclusion. "That must mean Commander Saviz is as strong as a demon!"

Gosh! Aren't I lucky to serve such a powerful commander!

And so, I continued on my merry way.

Chapter 37:

Blackpeak Mountain Part 1

WHEN WE REACHED the foot of Blackpeak Mountain and saw how steep it was, we got off our horses to travel on foot. No sooner had I unfastened my things from the saddle than my three companions took my things off my hands.

“Huh? Then where’s my share?” I questioned, thinking it odd they’d leave nothing for me to carry.

“You can just let us know when you’re feeling thirsty or peckish,” Green replied.

The non sequitur confused me for a moment, until I realized he thought I was talking about *food*. I gave him a miffed look. *That’s obviously not what I meant! Just how much of a glutton do you think I am, Green?*

Blue, having misunderstood as well, pulled out a small snack wrapped in paper to placate me. “Cheer up, Fia. Here, you can snack on this as we walk.”

Not you too, Blue! Grr, fine! I’ll eat like you guys want me to! Happy?! I took a bite, then broke into a smile at how yummy it was. The three of them looked at one another as though to say, “See? She was just grumpy from lack of sweets,” even though it wasn’t the truth. Part of me wanted to boast about how thankful they should be that I played along with their misunderstanding, but I was mature enough to hold my tongue. *Heh, I’m the most mature person here!*

After walking some distance up the mountain trail, I called out to Kurtis in the front. “Hey, Kurtis. You know the way, right?” He had been walking so assuredly, as if he knew exactly where he was going, but was that really the case? Blackpeak Mountain was Zavilia’s home, so I doubted we’d run into any trouble, but...now that I was actually on the mountain, I could see firsthand that the place was insanely

huge. I knew mountains were big, but I didn't think any could be *this* big. Just how exactly were we going to find Zavilia's nest?

Kurtis stopped walking and turned around. "I learned the location of the black dragon's nest from Quentin. There's a cave that opens up near the peak—they used it to reach the nest last time. I was thinking we could check there first."

"O-oh, I see!" I'd forgotten that Quentin had paid a visit to Zavilia's nest before. *Huh. I hadn't even thought to consult Quentin! Kurtis is just so smart*, I proudly thought.

Kurtis shrugged easily. "But it seems, ultimately, there was no need to ask anyone anything."

"Huh?" I said, confused.

Green and Blue suddenly tensed up. They scanned the area vigilantly as they wordlessly reached for their weapons.

"What?!" Thinking a monster had appeared even though we'd only just arrived, I stared off in the same direction as Green and Blue. Something red could be made out through the trees. "Huh, wh-what? Is that some red monster?"

It was too far away to make out clearly, but there was something among the trees that resembled a huge head.

I reached for my sword, but Kurtis soon calmed me down. "It's okay, Lady Fi. It is a monster, but I don't sense any hostility from it."

"Huh? What kind of monster isn't hostile?" I looked up at him with disbelief.

He merely shrugged. "This is a first for me as well, but... perhaps, say, if the monster were subordinate to a familiar, it'd all make sense."

"Huh?!"

Wait, does that mean this monster is Zavilia's ally? With that thought in mind, I trailed behind Kurtis with caution as he strode boldly forward. Green and Blue smoothly positioned themselves at my

sides and walked along with me. In no time at all, we reached a spot where the trees had been knocked down. Towering over the fallen trees was a single...

“R-red dragon?!” I exclaimed. Guy had mentioned there were red dragons spotted flying above Blackpeak Mountain, but seeing one firsthand was still a surprise.

The red dragon was the color of crimson and stood around five meters tall. It displayed its gorgeous red scales proudly and stood with otherworldly dignity. Red dragons were only supposed to live around volcanoes. It was strange for it to be on Blackpeak Mountain, a non-volcanic mountain.

Unlike me, Kurtis seemed unfazed by the red dragon’s presence. He walked up to its side, gave it a short nod, and then simply walked on by.

The red dragon remained docile, merely standing there and watching as Kurtis and the three of us walked past it.

After gingerly passing the dragon, I whispered my question to Kurtis. “K-Kurtis, why is that red dragon just standing there?”

He shrugged. “To mark the way, perhaps. I could see the black dragon being so eager to meet you that he’d place monsters along the path to make sure you didn’t get lost.”

“Wait, really?!” I exclaimed.

Zavilia had a dragon stand around waiting for us? But I didn’t even tell him I was visiting! Then I remembered—oh, right. He can receive my thoughts! Which means he knows I’m coming, yeah? Aw, how thoughtful of him to mark the way!

All smiles, I looked up at Kurtis. “Familiars are just so useful, aren’t they?”

“Well, I think yours is something of a special case. The black dragon is so all-powerful that he can order his subordinates to do anything he’d like. He’s loyal to you too, so he spares no effort for your sake.”

“O-oh, is that right?”

Certainly, Zavilia was special. Only a few evolved monsters had the same black color as him, so it made sense that he'd be able to do what most other monsters couldn't.

I nodded along like I understood. Green and Blue, on the other hand, seemed to be in shock from the whole experience, their breathing shaky.

After some more walking, we ran into another dragon marking the way, just like Kurtis had predicted.

“Wow! There's no chance we'll get lost like this! Such a royal welcome!” I said with awe.

Green looked bewildered. “No, Fia...this is nothing like a ‘royal welcome.’ I've never even heard of a familiar doing something like this. For control over a familiar to extend to other monsters is just... unthinkable. Fia, I've tagged along with you harboring nothing but the purest of intentions, eager to help, but I feel as though I'm walking away a thief of state secrets.”

Hearing him say that with such an utterly serious look, I broke out in giggles. “Whaaat? Like you'd ever be a thief! This ain't something so grand as a state secret, anyway. I'm just visiting my familiar. Besides, there's nothing weird about him getting his friends to welcome us.”

“You're really something, Fia,” muttered Green. “You can make even this sound like nothing. But we're no goddess like you. Please try to understand how us ordinary humans feel.” He sighed heavily.

Confused, I looked to Blue for an explanation. “Goddess? Blue, what's Green on about? Oh, don't tell me he's actually scared out of his mind right now and can't think straight.”

Blue blinked a few times, clearly uncomfortable, and then cleared his throat. “O-oh, uh, well, perhaps. Yes, my brother has never seen so many dragons before and is a little shaken from it. He seems to have *forgotten the mindset* he had when we began our journey. *Isn't*

that right, Brother?"

Green's eyes darted wide. "That's right! Fia, please disregard what I said. I was just referring to a saying we use in the Empire: May the blessings of the Goddess be with you."

"Oh?" Come to think of it, those two did come from an empire that believed in the Goddess of Creation. It seemed the word 'Goddess' got used a lot in various expressions out of respect for their deity. "Hee hee, what a nice saying, Green. May the blessings of the Goddess be with my cute, darling Zavilia too!"

"Is that...your familiar's name? Ha ha, I see! So the one in control of all these dragons of varying colors is your...familiar. Ha... ha...how incredible. I told myself I wouldn't be surprised by anything you do anymore, but this is just..." Green, ever the calm one, lost his cool for once and began muttering under his breath. Before he could finish his thought, though, he was interrupted by the loud thud of something crashing down from the sky.

The ground shook from the impact, kicking up a cloud of dust and flinging rocks and boulders into the air. Kurtis immediately moved to stand in front of me. I was protected from any harm, but I could hear a number of rocks pelt him.

"Kurtis, are you all right?!" I called. But he didn't reply, simply stood over me, shielding me.

In the cloud of dust emerged a single silhouette. It was many times larger than any human, and I could faintly make out the outline of wings. From its size, I thought for a moment that it might be Zavilia, but no—the fierceness and color of the gleam of its eyes told me right away that it wasn't him.

From the dust appeared a dark sandy-colored dragon, towering ten-meters high.

Wow, it's as big as Zavilia! Surprised though I was, I looked at the dragon with admiration. From within the dust blocking my view, I saw the gleam of two eyes.

"Lady Fi!" Kurtis warned me, but I'd already sensed the hostility in the taupe dragon's eyes.

Before I could even think to brace myself, it opened its maw wide and spewed flame. The blaze didn't measure up to what Zavilia had spat while fighting the blue dragons, but any dragon that could breathe fire was still among the strongest of its kind. At around two meters in diameter, the pillar of flame closed in faster than any human could dodge. It clearly meant to finish us all off in a single attack.

No time to dodge, so I raised a hand up at the encroaching flames and cast protection magic. *"Flame Shield!"*

Anti-fire shields for fire, anti-water shields for water. By limiting protection to a specific attribute, I could make my protection spells many times easier to cast.

As though summoned by my voice, a magic shield five-meters in diameter spread forth from my palm. The dragon's flames were repelled the moment they touched the shield, curving aside in a half sphere.



Your flames aren't half-bad, I thought, feeling their weight against my hand.

Green ran up and lifted his shield before me, but then he saw my magic and went stiff. Was it a mistake to display my magic so blatantly? No sooner had I wondered that than Green burst into laughter.

“Pfft ha ha! Yet more new magic?! I can’t believe you’re blocking all these flames yourself! Incredible, simply incredible! You never cease to surprise me, Fia!” He looked at my magic shield with fascination, as if moved beyond words. Blue soon ran to his side, a similar look on his face.

Overjoyed, I clenched my free hand and pumped my fist. *All right! Things turned out okay after all!* Around the time we were departing the Royal Capital, Kurtis told me that Green and Blue had been convinced the curse that let me use saint powers had returned. I had full faith in Kurtis, but part of me still wondered if things would really be so convenient. Unlike the mountains near the entrance of the Gazzar borderlands, Blackpeak Mountain was said to be teeming with monsters. And as there was no way Zavilia could have each and every monster under his control. I was certain I’d need to join a fight eventually. I was worried Green and Blue might grow suspicious when I used my saint powers, but looking at them now, I understood there wasn’t any need for concern. They accepted the fact that I had saint powers as though it were only natural. *I’m so glad these two are so simpleminded!*

“So, what’s the plan, Fia?” asked Green nonchalantly. “Should we take this thing down?” His expression seemed a little tense, making me think he was just putting on a brave front, but his cool line made me happy nonetheless.

How reassuring! *He’s completely bought into my curse excuse! Jeez, what was I so worried about in the first place?* It took guts for him not to want to flee from this massive dragon. Dragons were S-rank monsters that normally required around a hundred knights to fight, and this one

wasn't a mere red or blue dragon, but a taupe one. It was also large enough that it seemed like a clear outlier among dragons. It was either a mutated dragon or a dragon that had undergone some special sort of growth, one powerful enough to enable it to spew flame, but...

I looked at the dragon, feeling a bit troubled. It was such a special breed, unique even among its many brethren here. Seeing as it was on this mountain, it had to be one of Zavilia's allies...which meant there was no way I could bring myself to attack it just for being a little naughty. I eyed the dragon, trying to implore it to fall back—but the taupe dragon's fierce eyes only glared sharper and its flames only burned more intensely.

Oh dear. It's fully committed to fighting. Hmm...is there a way to make it give up without hurting it? Just then, I spotted a black dot in the sky. *Could that be...?* I squinted and saw the black dot grow bigger, until it quickly took the shape of a dragon I knew well. Gracefully, a large black dragon landed before me. A strong gust of wind blew, but unlike with the taupe dragon, there was no earth-shattering impact, nor any boulders or rocks blown aside. There was simply the beautiful dragon that had appeared before me, one of the few creatures permitted the color black: my now-grown, strong, darling little —“Zavilia!”

Happy to see him still looking so healthy and well after all this time, I shouted out his name. He laughed and, with a wide stretch of his wings, inclined his head cutely. **“I’m overjoyed you came to meet me, Fia. Welcome to Blackpeak Mountain, the place I call home.”**

He was bigger than when I last saw him. His spread wings glistened in the sunlight. The horn on his forehead that he'd broken was regrown, and there was an air of regality about him.

“I’ve missed you, Zavilia!” Overjoyed to hear his dear voice again, I ran up to him and hugged his chest.

He bent down and touched his head to my forehead. **“Energetic**

as ever, I see. I'm pretty sure I promised to be the one who'd return to your side before you forgot about me. Did you perhaps come meet me first because I was taking too long, and you were starting to forget me?"

I knew he was only joking but still replied, "I'd never! I just came because I wanted to see you!"

"I see. You came all this way just for that... Thank you, Fia," he said happily.

I smiled. "I'm relieved to see you're doing well! You've made a lot of dragon allies too. Red dragons, blue dragons, even a taupe dragon! I'm so happy for you."

He frowned, as though remembering something unpleasant. **"Yes, well... I'm not so sure this taupe dragon can be called my ally anymore."** He turned to look at the taupe dragon, who was now making itself small. In a cold voice lacking any of its former sweetness, he said, **"What is the meaning to this? I send you to welcome my master and you greet her with fire?"**

Oh, right. That. I had been so caught up with my reunion with Zavilia that I'd semi-forgotten about the whole dragon attack thing. *So Zavilia sent it to welcome us, huh? That's one way to do it...*

I looked at the taupe dragon. It was frozen stiff, its head ducked, and its body balled up. I faintly recalled it giving a yelp when Zavilia appeared, then drawing back and making itself small in hopes of not being noticed. Perhaps it had thought it could hide the fact that it attacked us, but my Zavilia was too smart to be tricked so easily!

After being questioned, the taupe dragon's gaze wandered guiltily. I began to feel a little bad for it. Zavilia didn't, however, and pressed the dragon for an answer. **"I believe I asked you a question, Zoil."**

The taupe dragon, Zoil, jolted with surprise. Then it hurriedly laid its head, stomach, arms, and even tail flat on the ground in submission. The look on its face reminded me of a forlorn puppy.

Aw...Zoil must really like Zavilia if he's so sad about being scolded.
Feeling bad for it, I couldn't help but step in. "Uhh, I don't really know much about dragon customs, but maybe welcoming guests by breathing fire on them is a thing for taupe dragons?"

"Oh, I see. So...instead of cooking for their guests, taupe dragons cook their guests. What an interesting custom."

"Huh?!" It was obvious now that Zavilia pointed it out, but one would normally be burnt to a crisp, without a way to block the fire. Thinking that was no way to treat a guest, I said, "Z-Zoil, I know this is unsolicited advice, but you might want to rethink how you welcome your guests."

Zoil returned my unsolicited advice with a glare, which, uhh... okay, fair enough. Dragons were already proud monsters, but Zoil must've been even prouder than most with its unique color and enormous size. Humans were far shorter-lived beings, so dragons probably considered us their inferiors anyway.

You know...with all of that in perspective, it really was a miracle that Zavilia warmed up to me at all. Despite being the one-and-only black dragon, he was such a compassionate and open-hearted thing.

With that thought still in mind, I listened as Zavilia said coldly, **"Let's put the matter of your 'custom' aside for now, as I can only see that conversation turning needlessly complicated. Listen, Zoil, and listen well. Fia is my master. The next time I find you showing her hostility, I'll put an end to you. Truthfully, I'd like to put an end to you now..."** He turned to look at me for permission, and I vigorously shook my head *no*. **"But you see, my master wouldn't like that."**

No, no, no! I can't have my dear little Zavilia "putting an end" to anyone! I thought.

Zoil visibly trembled. It mustered all the strength it had to lay itself as flat on the ground as possible.

Poor thing.

Zavilia gave Zoil one last glance before turning to me and apologizing. **“I’m sorry, Fia. You came into danger because I couldn’t properly control my dragons.”**

Not wanting to see Zavilia so down in the dumps, nor to let Zoil get scolded anymore, I tried to make the whole incident seem as trivial as possible. “I-It’s fine! I wasn’t in any danger at all! Zoil’s flames were nothing compared to yours. I mean, can you even call *that* an attack?”

“I see. So Zoil’s flames were mere child’s play for you, huh?” Zavilia laughed and looked over at Zoil. I followed his gaze and saw the taupe dragon was many times more dejected than before and had outright buried its head in the ground out of shame.

“Wow, Zoil really likes you, Zavilia! He’s all sad because you got angry at him.” Feeling a little bad for the taupe dragon, I tried to smooth things over between the two of them.

Zavilia gave me an exasperated look. **“You don’t seriously think Zoil’s pouting because of me, do you? Because I rather suspect he’s pouting because the human he expected to be ordinary not only blocked his flames but called him pathetic.”**

“Nah, no way, that can’t be. I mean, what kind of proud dragon would give a hoot what a human has to say?”

“Heh, you never change.” He tilted his head to the side. **“The way you interpret everything so conveniently for yourself really is something else. I may be a ‘proud dragon’ myself, but I can’t help but find myself intrigued by the things you say.”** With some exasperation, he looked at the three men around us, all of them standing stock-still. **“You’ve brought along quite the lineup. Even for you, these men are rather extraordinary. But what’s even**

more impressive is the fact that you're not even aware of how extraordinary they are. I've never seen anyone treat jewels like common stones."

"Jewels?" I parroted back, confused. *Was he talking about how they had colorful, jewel-like hair?* "Heh heh, that's a pretty fitting expression you have there, Zavilia! Oh, yes, these three are jewel-like through and through!"

I was complimenting his apt expression, but for some reason he replied with a cold, sidelong glance. **"Incredible. Even after saying it yourself, you remain unaware. Your problem is that you're too powerful, Fia. Your ability to remain completely unbothered by small issues, never needing to rely on or even deeply consider the capabilities of others, has made you dull."**

"Dull?!" Well, sure, to a monster I'm probably lacking in many departments, but you don't need to rub in how much dumber my species is!" I felt like I'd been insulted a bit, but that was surely only because Zavilia was less than a year old and still learning the right words.

Having had his insult overlooked, Zavilia laughed. **"Pfft ha ha ha! The difference between our species, huh? Your interpretations are always so...convenient!"**

I felt like there was something in his words that I didn't quite catch, but a compliment was a compliment. I smiled. "Aww, thank you, Zavilia! Oh, right—let me introduce you to my traveling companions. Don't forget to introduce me to that taupe dragon there too afterward, okay?"

Zavilia frowned. **"No need, I've seen everything you have. In fact, I'd say I know these three better than you do.. Hello there, Kurtis, Green, Blue."** As though to prove his claim, he greeted the three men by name without even being introduced.

Oooh, right. I'd forgotten that Zavilia had that handy thingy-thing going on. *Oh well, at least I still have the pleasure of introducing the*

three of them to Zavilia! Still smiling, I said, “Then let me introduce you to them! Everyone, this here’s my black dragon buddy.”

It was a bit late now—I’d definitely said his name a few times—but I finally recalled Quentin’s advice against revealing a familiar’s name to others, so I introduced Zavilia by his species. Then again, maybe that was a bit weird. Zavilia was the *only* black dragon, so there really wasn’t much point in trying to hide his identity. *Hmm...*

Under the intimidating gaze of the much taller Zavilia, Kurtis was the first to speak. “What a splendid dragon,” he cried with admiration. “I’m sure Lady Fi is proud to have such a strong guardian protect her.”

Perhaps pleased by his words, Zavilia spread his wings majestically. I looked up and took in his elegant, towering, jet-black form. *Splendid, indeed! If I were seeing Zavilia for the first time, I’d probably be moved by his beauty.*

As if somehow hearing my thoughts, Kurtis spoke too in a deeply moved voice. “I’ve never laid eyes on a dragon with a horn before! Carnivorous creatures don’t usually grow horns, only herbivores like stags or bulls, but I doubt a black dragon with such powerful claws and fangs could be an herbivore...” He looked Zavilia up and down as he murmured thoughtfully to himself. With a start, his eyes went wide. “Ah, of course! This is the dragon Lady Fi mentioned, the one that left to become a king! He grew a horn not to hunt but to protect Lady Fi. To think a black dragon would change its own nature for her sake. I’m in awe! Lady Fi, you never cease to amaze me with your deeds.” His voice was practically a whisper toward the end.

He courteously bowed to Zavilia. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Kurtis Bannister, of the Náv Kingdom Knight Brigades. I thank you for all the protection you’ve given Lady Fi until now. I too endeavor to protect her with all of my capabilities, but I am nothing compared to a black dragon who has lived for over a thousand years. It is reassuring to know you are here for her. I hope we can get along.”

With some surprise, Zavilia's eyes widened. **"You're humbler than I thought you'd be. I figured you'd argue for the right to be her primary guardian."**

With a wry grin, Kurtis lifted his head. "Perish the thought! Nothing is more important to me than Lady Fi's safety. I would never think to complain about having more people to protect her."

"Hmph. Not bad..." Zavilia said with some satisfaction.

Oh? It seemed Zavilia quite liked Kurtis. Well, isn't that great? It's always a nice feeling when your friends like your other friends!

Green stepped forward next, put his hand to his chest, and bowed. "Forgive my insolence—while I cannot share with you my full name, you may call me 'Green' for the time being. Fia saved me some six months ago and half forced me along on her journey here. I am still in search of something I can do to repay her, but...as you can see, I am a man of many shortcomings—I was even unaware of the simple fact that there were monsters who can speak the word of man. I implore your forgiveness for my ignorance and would be most appreciative of your guidance from here on out."

"Uh, what's with all the big words all of a sudden?!" I raised my voice in surprise, but for some reason no one else seemed particularly shocked. I tilted my head in wonder. *Whaaaaat? Did Green always have such a good head on his shoulders? No way, right?*

I was ignored entirely as Zavilia raised his chin slightly and said, a challenge plain in his voice, **"Hmph. I'm surprised a man of your status would say something like that. Were you not taught to bow your head to one person alone?"**

Green's eyes widened. "I see... You're aware of everything already."

Ah...that's how you're interpreting it. Green didn't know that Zavilia could experience all the things I did, both my senses and emotions, so it probably looked like Zavilia was omnipotent or something.

Green quickly shook his head. “Forgive me, I did not intend to inquire into the nature of your abilities. I... Yes, I have indeed received such teachings, as you say, but whether I follow them or not is up to my discretion. I do not choose who I hold in esteem by their status but rather by the qualities they embody. That is to say, I choose to bow my head only to those I deem worthy...and how could you be anything but worthy, seeing as you protected Fia while I still hadn’t even made an effort to change my lot in life?”

Zavilia sighed wearily. **“Fia, you are a magnet for the most eccentric human beings alive, and yet not one of them is a bad human being. Really, how do you do it?”**

“Hee hee, I take it you like Green as well?” With a wide grin, I patted Zavilia’s tummy.

Lastly, a nervous-looking Blue stepped forward. “It is nice to meet you. I am Blue. As with my brother, please forgive my inability to share my full name with you. Someone of my humble status has no meaningful words for someone as esteemed as yourself, but I swear to do what I can to protect Fia!”

“Hmph. All right. I can tell you know the significance of words. No, you wouldn’t swear such a thing lightly. Blue, I’ll hold you to your promise.” Saying that, Zavilia let out a deep sigh. **“And here I thought I’d try testing some of the people who had become glued to Fia’s side while I was gone, but there’s not a crumb of criticism I can offer the lot of you!”** He glanced over at Zoil. **“In contrast, my own people are a bit lacking... Let me introduce you—this is ‘the taupe dragon,’ a mutant dragon born this color. He’s a superior breed with a level of power somewhere between me and the other dragons.”**

After hearing Zavilia’s introduction, I exclaimed, “Oh,

introducing him as ‘the taupe dragon’ is just perfect! Zoil and I don’t have a familiar pact, so I’m not supposed to be saying his name!”

Zavilia’s just the smartest!

Quentin had told me familiars didn’t like anybody other than their master calling them by name, but the possibility the same might be true for monsters never occurred to me. I didn’t realize it, on account of how meek Zoil was, but calling him by name all this time was probably pretty rude!

I smiled, happy with my new discovery.

Zavilia craned his neck. **“Er, no. There’s no issue with you calling Zoil by name. You have a pact with me, which means you have a pact with my subordinates by extension.”**

“Huh? Y-you’re joking right? That’s news to me!”

He shrugged. **“Is that so? Well, let’s just say it’s a thing from now on.”**

“Hey, you can’t just make up stuff on the fly!” I scolded him for being so childish. I then saw Zoil shifting uncomfortably. “Oh, sorry. We were in the middle of your introduction, weren’t we, taupe dragon?”

Taking a page from Zavilia’s book, I politely referred to Zoil by color, not name. Zoil responded by snorting in displeasure. Seeing that, Zavilia knowingly waved his tail. **“The fact that you’ll say my name but not Zoil’s seems to have been taken as an insult, as though his name isn’t worth remembering. But go on and do what you will, Fia.”** He hunched down slightly. **“I typically live near the peak of this mountain. Would you like me to give you a ride there?”**

“Oh, would I!” Come to think of it, I hadn’t ridden on Zavilia’s back since my coming-of-age ceremony when he flew me home. He was a lot, lot larger now than he had been then, but I knew he was still the same cute Zavilia on the inside.

Or as I should say: the same cute, strong, and kind Zavilia!

I thought proudly.

“Can Kurtis, Green, and Blue ride along too?” I figured getting them all to spend time together was the best way to show the three how nice Zavilia was.

For some reason, despite knowing my thoughts exactly, Zavilia hesitated for a moment. **“If...that’s what you want.”**

Blue picked up on his hesitation. “My brother and I will ride the taupe dragon, if that’s all right. Or perhaps we could walk the way to the peak.”

Wow, Blue’s so good at reading the mood! I thought, admiring his tact.

On the other hand, my tactless ex-personal knight said, “I’ll ride with Lady Fi.”

Of course you will. Kurtis most definitely knew Zavilia wanted to monopolize my time after we’d been apart for so long, but he ignored that fact and put his own desires first! *How shameless...*

I gave my dunderheaded knight a weary look, but he didn’t retract his statement. In the end, it was decided we’d split into two groups and travel. We began tying down our bags on the dragons. That was when I overheard Green and Blue let out some big sighs.

“Haaah...”

The two of them drooped their shoulders. Maybe they were anxious about riding a dragon?

“Are you guys okay? Don’t worry, riding a dragon isn’t as scary as it sounds! I rode Zavilia once before, but he didn’t go *that* high, and the ride was pretty smooth.” I realized my gaffe immediately—I should’ve avoided using Zavilia’s name directly.

They didn’t seem to notice my error, however, and just shook their heads.

“That ain’t it, Fia,” said Green. “We’re not scared of riding a dragon, just weary from everything that’s going on. It’s all happening

so fast! We were about to fight this taupe dragon just moments ago and now we're *riding* it? Seriously, what's happening?"

I cocked my head. "Is it really that complicated? Zoil and Zavilia are allies, so there's no need to fight."

Green threw his hands up in the air, frustrated. "I know that! It's just that there's so much I'm struggling to wrap my mind around! For instance, how do you have the strongest dragon completely under your thumb?! Just how incredible are you?!"

Huh? Uh, should I recount everything from the moment I met Zavilia when he was injured?

"The guardian beast of the Náv Kingdom is the black dragon, correct?" Blue broke in. "That you searched for the one-and-only black dragon and made it your familiar for your kingdom's sake is inspiring."

"Yeah, uh...totally!" Oh, yeah! I'd forgotten that Zavilia is the guardian beast of the Náv Kingdom. They probably made him their guardian beast because he looked so strong, but I'll bet they didn't ask for permission. Wait, but...

"This area wasn't part of the Náv Kingdom three hundred years ago, right?" It might not be so obvious anymore, but I was a princess in my past life, so I'd dutifully memorized the borders of my kingdom and the surrounding nations. By my recollection, Blackrock Mountain wasn't a part of the Kingdom three hundred years ago—which meant it was incorporated into the Kingdom sometime between then and now, so...

"Of course! The Kingdom was so happy to obtain Blackpeak Mountain and the rest of the Gazzar territory that they made the black dragon who lived here their guardian beast!" Certain I was right, I proudly looked up at Green.

He shook his head. "No, the black dragon was made the Kingdom's guardian beast first. Plus, this territory was freely ceded to you by our Arteaga Empire. I'd understand if it was won in a battle,

but I doubt the Kingdom would bother making a whole deal out of something gained for free.”

“Wait, this land used to be part of the Arteagian Empire?” That info didn’t match what I remembered at all. While it was still situated on the westernmost side of the continent, the Náv Kingdom was smaller three hundred years ago. These northern territories were part of another country back then, and that country wasn’t the Empire at all—no, the Empire was located on the easternmost side of the continent. There used to be a number of other countries sandwiched between us, but now the Empire took up the northern-center part of the continent, and the easternmost lands were occupied by other countries. Between those countries were the Kingdom and the Empire, practically neighbors with only one tiny nation between them.

From the western end of the continent, the nations were currently lined up like this: the Náv Kingdom, the small Holy Kingdom of Dhital, and then the Arteaga Empire. But if this was once ceded by the Empire like Green said, then that had to mean the Empire once existed where both the Holy Kingdom of Dhital and parts of the Náv Kingdom were, right?

Uhhh, so what’s with all that? I wondered.

Kurtis stepped in. “Around three hundred years ago...about ten years after the passing of Her Holiness the Great Saint, the Arteaga Empire took control of the northern half of the continent in its entirety from east to west.”

“Huh?! H-half the continent? Seriously?” I couldn’t help but exclaim in surprise.

Is such a thing even possible?! I’d never heard of a country ruling half of our huge continent before. The Empire had been the strongest superpower back then, but their territory only stretched from the eastern end to the northern center. He was saying they somehow doubled that and reached the western end, all in just ten years?!

“Oh, yes, the emperor three hundred years ago really knew how

to wage war!" Blue said candidly.

"Yeah, there probably isn't anyone in history better than the Black Emperor," Green said.

"The Black Emperor?" I parroted back, hearing yet another name I wasn't familiar with. The emperor three hundred years ago had a different moniker, so this Black Emperor probably referred to someone else. Which meant the emperor must have changed sometime after I died.

Black dragon, Black Knight, Black Emperor...wow, there's so much black!

"That Black Emperor must've been quite the generous man to just give away part of his empire for nothing." But then another possibility struck me. "Although...I guess the same person who took the land doesn't necessarily have to be the one who gave it away. It could've been a different emperor, huh?"

"No, you were right," said Kurtis softly. "The one who ceded our Kingdom the Gazzar territory was, without a doubt, the Black Emperor. In fact, the Black Emperor was *also* the one who established the neighboring Holy Kingdom of Dhital."

"Is that right?" So the current shape of Náv and its neighbors was largely influenced by the actions of this Black Emperor. *He must've been quite a powerful guy!*

As though in agreement with my thoughts, Green said, "The Black Emperor was also the strongest of knights, something that helped him swiftly take hold of half the continent. Perhaps that's why he was willing to freely give up land and even establish second nations. Actually...I believe the Black Emperor hailed from the Náv Kingdom, which might be why he gave them some land."

"Oh. He was from Náv...?" My heart began to race. Of course. Why hadn't I realized sooner that there was a possibility this emperor could be someone I used to know? Dimly, in my unconscious mind, the memory of the captain of my old Royal Guard surfaced. "Um...

where did the name ‘Black Emperor’ come from anyway?” I tried to ask as casually as I could while I recalled my knight with gray hair, silver eyes, and a beauty like a star in the night sky. My heart betrayed my calm demeanor however, thumping away like an alarm bell. Begrudging my pounding heart I waited, unblinkingly, for an answer.

Unaware of my tension, Green blew away all my expectations by off-handedly answering, “Oh, that? It comes from his appearance. He had black hair and eyes. Even his attire was always black.”

“Wait...what?! Black...hair and eyes...?” I had been so certain in my assumption that it took a moment to process the words. *Uh...black hair and eyes...which means...* Finally understanding, I let out a deep sigh of relief, earning a quizzical look from Green and Blue. For a moment, I thought Sirius—the captain of my Royal Guard in my past life—had somehow become the Black Emperor. *O-of course not!*

Sirius had lived in the Náv Kingdom his whole life; there was no way the Arteaga Empire would just call him over out of the blue. In fact, Sirius himself told me that he wanted to spend the rest of his days in the Kingdom, and he was the kind of man who could do whatever he wanted. Yeah, that’s definitely what he wound up doing!

Phew. Why’d I even get all worried anyway? Ah...probably because Green said the Black Emperor was the strongest knight.

The strongest knight three hundred years ago was Sirius, without a doubt. But somebody like an emperor was likely to have their memory embellished, so it wasn’t that weird for the Black Emperor to be *called* the strongest knight.

I allowed myself to relax some more...and then, suddenly, wasn’t so sure of myself. *What am I doing? I’m lucky enough to be reborn, and now I want to know what happened to Sirius after I died? Why do I deserve that? What good would knowing even do me? Jumping to conclusions about his life, all according to history that might not even be accurate, I...I’d just be dragging his good memory through the mud...*

No. I mustn't dredge up the past.

I balled my hands into fists, sure of my decision. As I was so distracted with convincing myself, I never noticed Kurtis's worried eyes on me.

“Whoa! The mountain you live on is incredible, Zavilia!”

I looked down at Blackpeak Mountain from atop Zavilia's back. As Zavilia had offered, Kurtis and I were riding atop him all the way to the mountain's peak.

The mountain looked splendid from above, and the air was brisk. I could understand why Zavilia made this place his home.

Before long, we neared the peak. There I saw a number of shapes on the ground in various colors. *Hmm? Are those all monsters?* I strained my eyes to look. Not only were they all monsters, but they were all dragons! *Wow! There's got to be at least a hundred of them!* I had never seen so many S-rank monsters in one place. It was quite an intimidating sight.



Zavilia slowly began his descent. As he did so, all the dragons straightened their posture and stared up at us. *Aww, my boy's so popular!*

Zavilia landed a short distance away from the dragons and gave me a questioning look. I figured he wanted to wait until my thoughts were settled, him being able to read my mind. Understanding this, I confidently met the gaze of the dragons and patted Zavilia gratefully.

Perhaps it was because familiars weren't a thing in my past life, but I had a habit of immediately sizing up the power of the monsters I saw, even if they were someone's familiar or, like now, not hostile. I just couldn't help unconsciously calculating whether our side would be able to defeat theirs. And right now, with only Kurtis, Green, Blue, Zavilia, and me acting as a saint against about one hundred dragons...

“Ha...I'm impressed. Only you would conclude our side was stronger with such little information,” Zavilia murmured admiringly, having read my mind. **“You really are something else entirely when it comes to battle. Even after concluding we'd win, you're next considering whether there are even better strategies, plotting out different patterns our fight could take... Yes, this familiar pact really is convenient. As a monster, I'd be privy to all your strategies amidst a fight.”**

His statement broke into my concentration. “Huh? My strategies aren't that good, are they? I tried sharing my ideas with the knights I fought with in my past life, but they were never really that well received.”

Seeing Kurtis let out a big, grandiose sigh from the edge of his vision, Zavilia replied, **“Is that so?”**

Huh? Am I not trustworthy or something? Don't look at Kurtis, he's biased! He's always overestimating me; if you're going to believe anyone, believe me!

Zavilia tilted his head cutely and looked at me. **“Whatever you say. I have one request for you, Fia. You tend to underestimate**

the importance of a familiar pact, you see. A familiar pact is something vitally important. Don't go thoughtlessly making any more."

"Huh? Don't I already have one with you, though?" I blinked a few times, confused.

"Yes, but there's no rule that says you can only make a pact with one monster. Someone of your capability could probably make as many pacts as you'd like, but...I'm strong enough for several, so I'd rather you not go making any more pacts."

I couldn't help but think he looked adorable saying that, even with his large size. *Aww, Zavilia!* Despite boldly proclaiming he'd become a king and then leaving my side, he still wanted to be pampered.

I hugged him tightly. "Of course, Zavilia, anything you want! You're my only familiar, now and forever!"

From behind me, I heard Kurtis sigh yet again. "You make promises far too easily, Lady Fi. There is a benefit to having more familiars, you know?"

Perhaps so, Kurtis. But I don't need any familiar besides Zavilia!

Hearing my thoughts, Zavilia broke into a wide smile. I replied with a smile of my own.

Some time later, Zoil arrived carrying Green and Blue. Together, we approached the many-colored dragons.

There were the red dragons that lived near volcanoes, the blue dragons that lived near water, and the yellow dragons that lived in deserts. It was strange to see so many dragons from so many different environments all gathered together in one place. Even if it turned out to be only temporary, this was quite the feat. I was beginning to see

Zavilia in a whole new light. The reality of his goals finally, fully hit me.

Wow...Zavilia's really trying to become a king. It was said that dragons felt more at home with their own kind. Perhaps Zavilia would live here forever with all his new fellows instead of coming back to me...

"Yeah, that's not happening," Zavilla said matter-of-factly, just as that thought crossed my mind. **"I wanted to become the Dragon King so I could better protect you with the strength of numbers. My only goal has always been your safety, and what better place could I assure your safety than by your side?"**

Thrilled, I hugged his stomach. "Aww, Zavilia!"

The instant I did so, the other dragons began to clamor.

"Huh?" *Um...do dragons not hug in front of each other or something? Is this something weird in their culture?* With a start, I let go of him.

Zavilia gave me a funny look. **"You should just do what you like, Fia. Everyone's a little flustered because this is the first time they've heard someone say my name before, but they'll get used to it."**

"O-oh, I see!" It seemed that monsters only allowed their equals to say their name, similar to how familiars only allowed their masters to say theirs. That must mean no other monster ever said Zavilia's name.

Satisfied with his answer, I moved my hands to the ribbon of my hair accessory and fixed it a little; had to make a good impression on all those dragons, you know? I'd been wearing the griffon feather hair accessory ever since I entered the Gazzar borderlands. It had gotten ruffled up a little from riding Zavilia, so I fiddled with the displaced ribbon on it.

I saw the eyes of the dragons follow my hands to my hair. *Got 'em!* I wanted them to see that I liked monsters—after all, my hair

accessory had monster feathers instead of flowers or jewels. Just had to hope that it worked...

I offered up as radiant a smile as I could muster and introduced myself to the horde of dragons. "Nice to meet you all! I'm Fia Ruud. I've come today to see my friend Zavilia. I hope you don't mind us looking around. We'll try to stay out of everyone's way."

A good first impression began with a smile, and it would seem I'd made a good one. None of the dragons expressed any complaint. Unless...they *couldn't* complain with Zavilia standing directly behind me, pressuring them.

After that, Zavilia showed off everyone's living quarters. For the red dragons, there was a hollow resembling a volcanic crater where a fire was constantly burning. For the blue dragons, a reservoir had been built. For the yellow dragons, there was an area where sand had been plentifully scattered. It was all very impressive. A lot of work had been put in to make this place comfortable for different species of dragon.

I couldn't stop gawking as Zavilia gave me the grand tour. The dragons all seemed totally at home living here. Everything looked so cozy that I couldn't help but smile.

Zavilia's so nice! He'll definitely become a great king one day!
I thought as we entered the cave Zavilia used as a nest. The ceiling was high, and there were multiple entrances for good ventilation. He showed us the spot where he usually slept in a nice, wide, chilly corner.

"Aw, how lovely!" I looked up at him and noticed the ceiling above us was shiny here and there. I cocked my head curiously. Zavilia noticed where I was looking and stretched his neck up, then plucked off a piece of the ceiling. He placed a shiny black stone in my hand. I thought it might be a magic stone at first, but those were taken from the bodies of monsters...

Before I could think about it further, a red dragon appeared to

inform us that dinner was ready.

That night, we ate around a big fire in the red dragons' imitation volcanic crater. The dragons had hunted us down some high-quality monster meat, which Green and Blue—being seasoned adventurers—cooked over the fire for us.

“Mmm, delicious, delicious!” I said, as though my brain had forgotten all other words. As soon as I finished my meat, somebody would offer me another piece. “Th-thanks, but my stomach can only fit so much!”

They seemed to be measuring my own appetite against theirs, but there was no way a dainty girl like me could eat as much as some burly guys, let alone a dragon! Or so I told myself...but in the end I lost out to my desire and tried to pack some more food in. *Some “dainty” girl I am...*

Afterward, as I let my meal settle—or rather, as I was painfully immobilized from overeating—I rested against Zavilia and watched the fire crackle.

I let out a sigh of satisfaction. “I’m really happy I could come see you, Zavilia; and I’m glad to see you’re doing well for yourself here. Yeah...I climbed a mountain first thing in the morning today, ate my fill of yummy food, and now have a warm, cozy fire. I feel so comfy, I could just fall asleep.”

“Why don’t you, then?” Zavilia said invitingly.

What a tempting offer! But it would be such a waste to take it...

“I wouldn’t mind that—I’m sure I could get a real nice nap in—but I’d rather make use of this rare opportunity to chat with you. We can talk about anything, really. Maybe what you’ve been up to on the mountain, or maybe we could ask Green and Blue what they’ve been up to this past half year. I haven’t asked them myself yet! Come to think of it, I haven’t asked Kurtis what *he* was up to before we met either.”

The three men, as well as the one dragon, gave each other

quizzical looks.

“I really doubt you’d enjoy hearing our boring stories,” Green said, speaking for all of them.

How perplexing! *You’re kidding me, right? You’re one of the most interesting people I know, Green! I mean, your head was constantly bleeding when we first met for crying out loud, and yet you acted like it was nothing! If that was nothing to you, then I’m sure even your “boring” stories are actually really interesting!*

“Oooh, I know what we could do!” I said, grinning. “Let’s all share a special story we have. Anything is fine really, so long as you make it better than the last person’s.”

I was so sure that it was a great idea, but the guys and the dragon didn’t look so certain.

“I don’t know...” Green muttered. “What counts as special differs from person to person.”

Looking a bit hesitant, Blue said, “There’s nothing I’m unwilling to share with you, Fia, but I get the impression there’d be more value in you sharing something yourself.”

“Wha—*value*?! Why should I consider whether doing something has *value* when I’m just trying to have some post-meal *fun*?! Isn’t that what really matters?”

Blue was the most tactful and the wisest of the three brothers, but every now and then he’d say something senseless. T’was a shame, since he’d be perfect otherwise!

Kurtis nodded in agreement. “Ah, yes. Well said, Lady Fi. Might I go first, then?”

“Wha—hey, that’s playing dirty!”

“Ah, shoot, he got a leg up on us!”

I ignored the brothers’ complaints and smiled broadly. “Of course you may, Kurtis!”

He caught on fast, just as I’d expect. He picked up on how I

discreetly added the condition “each person’s story has to be better than the last person’s” and jumped on the chance to go first.

I looked at him with admiration as he began to speak.

“...and in the end, the experience proved valuable. The young girl had learned modesty and prudence. She now knew better than to go on adventures with men she’d only just met, and she learned just how much responsibility a familiar pact involved for both parties and would never think to make a pact only mere moments after meeting a monster. Furthermore—”

I sat there mute, my eyes glazing over, as Kurtis’s story continued ad nauseam. *Oh no. Kurtis’s story is suuuuper boring. How do you even make up something this boring? And is it just my imagination or is he using this opportunity as an excuse to gripe about me?* I gave him a suspicious, inquiring look; but he showed no sign he noticed and continued to prattle on with even more intensity.

“Lady Fi is, of course, perfectly wonderful the way she is—but I believe that if she just learned to carry herself with more majesty and earned everyone’s admiration, she’d reach new heights only dreamed of. To achieve this, I suggest—”

I saw Green, Blue, and Zavilia were looking at him with half-pitying eyes and understood I *wasn’t* imagining things. *Hey! He’s totally just using this as an excuse to vent about me!*

Buuut...then again, if this is what he wants to talk about for his turn, it’s only right I listen, I thought as I slumped over. *Aaaghh, darn it all! If I knew I would have to sit through something this boring, I would’ve just slept like Zavilia suggested! And you know what? If I’d actually listened to what Green said about “special” meaning something different to everyone, I could’ve avoided all this trouble by adding some more specific conditions on what we could talk about!*

As I groaned to myself, the strangest thing happened. Green and Blue, who'd been listening to Kurtis's rambling half-heartedly, were now sitting upright and vigorously nodding along.

"Uh...?" I wondered what could have possibly possessed them, but nothing came to mind. For some reason, they were expressing total agreement with Kurtis.

"Oh, I see, I see! You're not in the same organization as Fia for nothing! I can tell you've spent a lot of time considering how best to express Fia's splendor." Green voiced his admiration with crossed arms.

Huh? Why's Green talking nonsense now? I thought, shooting him an exasperated look.

Before I could say anything though, Blue spoke up at his side with excitement in his eyes. "Yes, it's exactly as you say, Kurtis! The whole world should worship and extol Fia!"

What the heck? There's no booze here, so why are these two talking like they're drunk? No, I should say the three of them! Kurtis doesn't get off the hook...

I glared back and forth at the trio. Perhaps because he felt cocky from having the audience on his side, or perhaps because he never cared about my input at all, Kurtis continued his boring talk with his two feverish supporters for what felt like an eternity.

Some time later (by which point I'd obtained enlightenment by emptying my mind), Kurtis's complaining/scolding/preaching session came to an end. Having overcome this tribulation, I heaved a sigh of relief.

Except...now Kurtis was looking at me, his eyes expectant.

Whaaat?! I had a general idea of what he wanted, but...*you've got to be kidding me!* Still, I understood he was devoted to me and meant no harm, so I forced a smile. "Uhh, yeah. That was *kindaaa* basically what I was hoping for, pretty much!"

Kurtis broke into a beautiful, beaming smile, like a flower

blossoming wide open.

Someone's easy to please... I thought, turning around and heaving out a sigh. It was almost as though he wanted to make me “the greatest lady there ever was” in this life just as he swore to in his past life. My life ended quite prematurely, so it wasn't like I didn't understand where he was coming from—but far from being a princess, I was a knight now, and one with no chance of marrying into high nobility. Kurtis's lofty hopes were wasted on me. How was I supposed to let him down gently...?

I racked my brain and furrowed my brow in thought, but I was interrupted by Green. “All right, I'll go next.”

I snapped back to my senses and gave him a distrustful look. *Should I let him? He's been acting weird for a while now. What if he picks up where Kurtis left off with another boring ramble?*

With caution, I decided to let him talk.

With nothing outwardly off about him, he began to speak. “Let me tell you about this unusual, one-of-a-kind girl I met...a girl with a nonsensical curse that forced her to fight as a saint whenever she journeyed with adventurers, or else she'd marry late. Pretty strange, huh? Now, this girl was no saint, but she claimed to have gained saint-like powers from her curse. I couldn't help but wonder at the moment, could you really call that a curse? Was this not a blessing?”

I stared at him mutely. *Huh, that's funny. That girl sounds a lot like me... Is he recounting the time we met?* I thought with a tilt of my head.

He paid me no mind. “Oh, and how blessed did she turn out to be! I imagine the Black Emperor felt the same way I did when he met the Goddess of Creation and began to worship her three hundred years ago! That is to say—”

From the corner of my eye, I watched Green go on with excitement as I quietly repeated part of his story. “The Goddess of Creation...” Green was from the Arteaga Empire, which worshipped

the Goddess, so it wasn't entirely too strange for him to bring her up, but...

I called upon the memories of my past life and asked, "Green, is the Goddess of Creation worshipped in the Arteaga Empire the same deity as the Goddess of the Beginning, she who scattered blessed seeds across the Empire?"

From what I could recall, the Goddess of Creation referred to a deity that helped shape the Arteaga Empire. During the early days of the Empire, it was believed that the Goddess scattered crop and fruit seeds across the land, making the country bountiful. But why would Green say the Black Emperor had met the Goddess of Creation...? Was it maybe a metaphor for the newly acquired territories being sowed and turned plentiful?

Green's eyes went wide with surprise. "Fia, you're amazing! I'm genuinely surprised you've studied so much of our Empire's history! You're right, the Goddess of Creation originally referred to the Goddess who scattered seeds across the Empire and brought us plentiful harvests, but there was a religious reformation during the Black Emperor's era. Nowadays, everyone understands the Goddess of Creation to refer to the Goddess that brought salvation through healing."

"Huh?" *That was quite the daring reformation the Black Emperor went for. I can't believe he did away with what was essentially the Empire's creation myth and reinterpreted the Goddess into what was essentially... essentially...* "A...saint...?"

Seeing me murmur to myself, Green gave me a cautious look. "Fia...do you remember how we told you our little sister had red hair?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Blue said something about her hair color being the same as mine." I was caught off guard by the sudden topic shift but managed to trace my memory back.

Come to think of it, I remembered that on our adventure, they'd

mentioned that hanging out with me felt like they were with their little sister because our hair was the same color. Didn't that mean their little sister's hair was red?

Green confirmed it. "Right. Women with red hair are highly revered in the Empire. In fact, that's precisely why my sister was cursed at birth to sleep forever—because her hair color would make her a political threat. This is all because...the Goddess of Creation, the most worshipped figure in all of the Empire, is said to have red hair."

"Huh?!"

Green looked me square in the eyes now. "Originally, there was no record of what the Goddess might have looked like. But in the Black Emperor's day, she was given a more defined form. The Goddess of Creation is now understood to be a red-haired woman who used the power of healing."

I pursed my lips, beginning to fit the pieces together.

The Black Emperor ruled three hundred years ago. He took the Goddess of Creation who had been worshipped since the Empire's early days and redefined her as a red-haired woman who used the power of healing. I could think of only one red-haired woman with such powers of healing from that time—myself. But maybe it was just a coincidence. I mean, was I really so shameless as to think I'd be called a Goddess?

"Um, I recall there was a saint with red hair three hundred years ago, but..." My voice trailed off as I reconsidered asking. What was the point? There was no way, right?

"Ah, yes," Blue cut in. "The Black Emperor never stated so directly, but it is thought that he believed the Great Saint Serafina was the Goddess."

“O-oh.” *So it was me after all! But...why? Why was the Black Emperor so taken with me?* “Y-you said the Black Emperor was from Náv, right? Th-then maybe he saw the Great Saint somewhere and had his heart captivated by how utterly beautiful, graceful, and noble she was?!” I said the first thing that came to mind and was met with silence. *Huh? Uh, did I say something weird...?*

The one to break the silence first was Kurtis. “It must be as you say! The Black Emperor surely laid eyes on the Great Saint and had his heart captivated by her beauty, grace, and nobility—there is no doubt!”

“Aaaah!” The instant I heard his words, I buried my face in my hands out of shame. I had been so sure it was possible when I said it, but hearing it from someone else’s mouth made it just sound silly.

Wh-what was I thinking?! There’s no way the Empire would worship me as a Goddess for years on end for such an inane reason! There’s got to be something else, right?! The Black Emperor must have done his religious reformation for some kind of political gain or something. Either way...the truth was probably only passed down within the Imperial Family, so there’s no way we’d ever know it.

I still had my face buried in my hands when Blue tried to cheer me up. “Don’t worry, Fia. Sure you have red hair resembling the Great Saint—that is, the Goddess of Creation—but none of us thought for a moment that you had yourself in mind when you said all that about her being beautiful, graceful, and noble.”

I groaned at his words. *But I was totally thinking about myself when I said all that! I really am shameless!*

I moved my fingers just a smidge and peeked at Blue from between them. I said, “I seem to have gravely misunderstood. Now that I think about it, I know nothing about the Black Emperor anyway, so there’s no way I’d understand why he did what he did, even if I tried. I’m sorry if I offended you in any way by mocking a hero of your people.” A thought crossed my mind. “Right...he’s a hero, one

who united the northern half of the continent, so it only makes sense that he'd have a lot of political stuff going on. I'm sure he had a very good reason for making the Great Saint a Goddess."

Having voiced the thought, I became sure it was right. *You know what? Yeah! The Black Emperor was a hero who conquered the most territory in the history of the Empire. There's no way someone on his level would be smitten with me when I don't even remember the guy! How could I have been so silly as to come to such a conclusion? Gosh, whether now or three hundred years ago, I can be so slow when it comes to these political kinds of things. I better be extra careful of what I say from now on...*

Interrupting my self-reflection, Green tried to comfort me. "Of course, there's no knowing what the Black Emperor intended now that he's passed away...but I agree with Kurtis. I believe his heart was with the Great Saint."

"Huh?" Surprised, I removed my hands from my face and looked up at him. Despite having said basically the same thing, there was so much more gravity to his words, given Green's heavy impartiality toward me.

"The Black Emperor," Green continued, "conquered new lands with terrifying speed, but unlike other emperors, he didn't care about having descendants to inherit his land. He lived the entirety of his life unmarried, likely because his heart pined for another."

"Wait, what?" Was an emperor even allowed to stay single?

Seeing my surprise, Blue added, "There's even an account of the Imperial Court arranging a high-ranking noble lady to sneak into the Black Emperor's bedchamber in an attempt to seduce him, but that only ended in her being killed by his own hand. He was, in many ways, a ruler unlike any other."

"Oh my."

"So you see, your earlier statement wasn't so far off the mark. Of course, the Black Emperor was well versed in matters of diplomacy and warfare, so there might have been other considerations to be had,

but I believe at the core of it all were his feelings for the Great Saint.”

Green agreed. “Yeah. It’s probably partly due to him being from the Náv Kingdom. It’s the opinion of modern historians that he might have been saved on the edge of death by the Great Saint.”

“I-Is that so?” I said. *Uhhh, that changes things. If I healed the Black Emperor, we had to have known each other at some point, right?* I glanced Kurtis’s way, but he merely stared at me, expressionless. *All righty then.* Kurtis could hide what he was thinking pretty well when he wanted to, with the experience of both being my ex-personal knight and a captain under his belt. But hiding his thoughts meant he was being careful about something. Perhaps that meant I was better off not knowing, but I couldn’t help but be curious. “Um... incidentally, what was the Black Emperor’s name?”

Thinking nothing of the question, Blue answered. “Oh, his name was—”

And my jaw dropped, for it was a name I knew from my past life.

Castor. That was the Black Emperor’s name.

I blinked a few times after hearing it. “Huh? Ca...Castor?”

That was the last name I expected to hear—because it was one I had chosen myself.

In my past life, I had three older brothers and one older sister. My older sister’s name was Shaula, and she was a former first princess who married and became Duchess of Barbizet. She was with child the last time I saw her; I still remember how her belly had a cute little bulge. She asked me to name her new child, so with a smile, I suggested, “*How about Castor if it’s a boy and Adhara if it’s a girl?*”

In the end, I died at the Demon Lord’s castle and never got to see

Shaula's child. But I had a feeling, her being who she was, that she stuck with my suggestion.

In my surprise, I turned to Kurtis. "Huh? Shaula's—er, I mean, the person the Great Saint named became emperor of the Empire?!"

I wasn't sure I should reveal that I knew such details in front of Green and Blue, but I was kind of beyond caring. The moment I asked my question, however, the gears in my head began to turn.

It's not all that far-fetched. My father in my past life, the king of Náv, had a little brother—Sirius's father, Duke Ulysses. His wife, Duchess Ulysses, was originally from a ducal family in the Empire. From what I remembered, the emperor was then in his prime years and had a queen and many concubines, but no child. It wasn't unthinkable that they might have adopted a child from a high-ranking Náv family, given the two nations' connections. In fact, that might've proven even more convenient than adopting from within the Empire, as they could avoid infighting.

Kurtis looked me squarely in the eyes and answered my question, "Yes, it is as you say. The one who took up the name left behind by Her Holiness Serafina became the Black Emperor..." There seemed to be something hidden in his words, but I was too caught up in my excitement to notice.

"So I was right!" I exclaimed. I once again began to keenly feel the sheer length of the time that had passed me by.

Wow...I can't believe Shaula's child was born, grew up, and became emperor of the Empire. I keep forgetting, but three hundred years really have passed. I'm sure many more things have occurred since then too...

But...wait, didn't the Black Emperor have black eyes and black hair? Can you get black from mixing Shaula's red and Duke Barbizet's brown...?

Having read my mind, Zavilia pointed out, "**Fia, hair color doesn't mix like that. Hair color is only taken from one parent, or sometimes from an ancestor further back.**"

"R-r-right! I knew that!" I said, nodding my head. *That's Zavilia*

for you! So smart!

Zavilia turned his gaze to Kurtis. He stared at the man, seeming to search his face for something. Kurtis just stared blankly back, not saying a word.

There was silence for some time.

Seeming to have somehow found the answer he was looking for, Zavilia murmured, **“Hmph. You would hide something from her despite being her former sworn sword? I’m sure you think what you’re doing is for her own sake, but do you really know what’s best for her?”**

Kurtis scowled and weakly said, “You’re not wrong, black dragon. You’re not, but...you understand nothing of what it feels like to lose someone dear.” He covered his face with his hands.

Worried, I called out to him. “Kurtis...”

He was being intentionally vague for some reason, perhaps to leave me—if not Green and Blue—in the dark on something. *Maybe I shouldn’t ask*, I thought, as I crouched down before him and peered into his face.

He raised his eyes slightly. Weakly, he said, “Lady Fi, I’ve been by your side since long ago, and have come to grasp things about you that even you yourself haven’t realized.”

Flustered by this sudden revelation, I said, “Th-thanks?”

“I have only one thing I ask of you: Please, treasure yourself more.”

“Huh? Uh, I think I treasure myself pretty well, though?” *Where’d all this come from? And I definitely treasure myself well enough, right?* “I eat whatever I want to eat, sleep whenever I want to sleep—I even came all this way to Blackpeak Mountain just to see Zavilia! I’m spoiling myself rotten!”

He didn’t seem convinced, and grabbed both of my hands and clung to them desperately. “Then would you be willing to let harm

come the way of your knights if it meant your own safety?"

"Huh? W-well, that's, uh..." *Why's he so extreme all of a sudden?* I wondered as I failed to answer his question. I gave him a bothered look, but he didn't let up.

"Lady Fi, I've told you this a number of times already, but not everyone possesses the same capabilities. Each person sometimes brings a different value to the battlefield. To put it simply, and in a way you would accept: Your power can save many knights. For that reason, you should prioritize your own safety above all else to save more knights across a wider span of time."

"I-I see..." I said, understanding what he was trying to say. It seemed he still felt overprotective of me, a holdover from his past life as my personal knight.

"If you understand," he said, relieved, "then promise me one thing. Please, allow your knights to put themselves in harm's way for your sake."

"O-of course!" I readily agreed. His lone request seemed a simple matter to accept. *I put myself in harm's way for my knights all the time as a saint! It's only right that I allow the opposite to happen too!*

I looked Kurtis firmly in the eyes and nodded my head vigorously so he knew I got it. It looked like a weight had been taken off his shoulders, but his expression still seemed a bit anxious.

You really are a worrywart, aren't you? I thought wryly. But of course, I was deeply grateful that he was worried for my sake, so I stood up and gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, I can be more careful than you'd think! Even now, I'm still growing as a person by the day."

"Is...that so? Yes...yes, it must be." He seemed to reflexively doubt my statement, but then murmured an agreement, perhaps more to convince himself. He remained silent for a moment, thinking. Gradually, his expression calmed. Perhaps my words had done the trick, or perhaps time was all he needed to calm down.

Sensing the change, Green changed the mood too—by resuming his story from where he left off. We all listened attentively.

I was relieved to see Kurtis calm again and listening to Green alongside everyone, but my mind was so hung up on all that Black Emperor stuff that my thoughts slowly drifted back to the topic.

I can't believe Shaula's child went on to become emperor of the Arteaga Empire! To think that he was the one who expanded their territory the farthest... And he wasn't even born when I last saw him, so he... Wait. Hold on...

Kurtis had said that the Black Emperor united half the continent around ten years after the Great Saint died. But...the timing didn't match up. If Emperor Castor was really Shaula's son, he'd have been ten years old when he conquered the north.

That's strange. I continued to ponder it for some time, until eventually I reached a conclusion. *Ah, well. Kurtis must've misspoken!*

I mean, it was impossible for the Empire to double its territory in just ten measly years, right? Kurtis probably meant to say thirty years, forty years. Something like that.

But it's not like him to make mistakes, I thought as I cocked my head. Regardless, what a discovery it was to learn that my sister's child had gone on to be remembered as the Empire's greatest emperor ever!

Knowing Shaula, I'm sure Castor grew up to be a talented, hard-working boy. That's probably why he was able to achieve all he did. Still, the life of a ruler is lonely at times...

I hope your life was a happy one, Castor.

Side Story:
The Black Emperor
(Three Hundred Years Ago)

FROM TIME TO TIME, I ask myself, “Why am I alive?”

To that I can only reply, “To atone.”

Her dazzling, beautiful crimson hair; her determined, brilliant golden eyes; her dainty, benevolent arms... I have to atone for the sin of allowing all this to be lost. To atone, I am prepared to endure whatever sacrifice, settlement, or suffering need be. Yet, despite my willingness to atone, from that day, that moment, that instant, and onward into eternity—my heart has remained broken.

Perhaps I have no heart left to feel with anymore...

“Your loyal subjects welcome you as the new emperor of the Arteaga Empire!” The Chancellor’s voice echoed throughout the throne room.

The spacious chamber was packed to the brim. Lines of nobles and knights expressed the highest form of respect to me, dropping to one knee and bowing their heads low enough to touch their foreheads to their other. The names of each and every one of the nobles and knights present were known far and wide, proof that the Arteaga Empire was indeed the greatest nation in all the continent.

To sit upon the Empire’s throne, to have such acclaimed figures bowing to me, it would make even the least power-hungry or glory-seeking man dizzy with elation. But I looked upon it all with a heart as unstirred as ever. No excitement brewed within me. I felt nothing at all.

Ah. So not even this can move me. I truly am broken, I thought mournfully.

Slowly, I cast my gaze over the assembly. They were all awaiting my words, heads bowed low. Off to the side, the previous emperor watched everything unfold with a content look on his face.

Rudely, I kicked one of my legs over the other, rested my elbow against an arm of the throne and my chin against my hand, and then finally addressed my kneeling subjects. “I am Emperor Castor. Serve me well.”

The shoulders of many jolted a little, likely at the surprise of hearing a different name than what they’d expected. But the name I was born with died with her; I had no desire to go by it ever again. It had been my life’s duty to be at her side and protect her—but with her death there was no longer a duty to be had, so I’d done away with my old name and the life it belonged to entirely. My radiant days with the Great Saint were a thing of the past. I had no right to keep using my old name, which had gained such renown from being by her side.

Nobody present offered a word of objection to my actions, likely recalling the feats I’d once achieved under my former name. And so, under oppressive silence, my enthronement was accepted by my subjects.

The citizens found me terrifying. No sooner had I taken the throne than they began, amongst themselves, to call me the Black Emperor. Not because I had once been called the Black Knight, nor because of my black hair and eyes, but simply because of my ferocity as a ruler. Just as the people associated red with the Great Saint herself, the color black was oft-associated with demons—yes, that was how much the people feared me.

But perhaps I *was* no better than a demon. I had, after all, become emperor to grant my own selfish desire. I wished to bring the surrounding lands all under one banner, and to do that I would need to ignite the flames of war everywhere.

And after expanding the Empire as far as I could under my rule, I would thoroughly scour the land to root out one specific demon. I believed that finding the sly, heartless, evil fiend that robbed this world of its light was the only way I could atone. It became all that I lived for...

How many years passed like that?

I was outside alone one night around midnight and gazing up at a full moon when a voice suddenly called out to me. "Should you be out this late unsupervised, Your Majesty the, ah, 'Black Emperor'?"

His voice was soothing. Just hearing it gently cast away the dreary silence of night. I knew who he was without turning to look, so instead I continued to gaze at the moon. What a lovely moon it was. The night enveloped all in pitch-black darkness as it always did, yet my figure stood clear, illuminated under the radiant moonlight.

It was an unwritten rule here in the Imperial Castle that I was not to be disturbed while moon-gazing in my garden...but a man approached me now regardless.

"Canopus..." I muttered without breaking my gaze from the moon. "Have you come all this way just to wisecrack at me?"

He walked up beside me and shrugged lightly. "Surely you jest. Why, to think that I would dare to wisecrack at Your Majesty. The timing of my arrival is a bit unfortunate, but I come bearing your periodic report from the Kingdom."

He didn't give his report right away, however, instead joining me in gazing at the moon. Clearly, the report wasn't urgent.

In a voice that hid all emotion, he said, "The moon is...truly beautiful tonight. Whenever I see a moon like this, I can't help but think of my master. Her Highness had a particular fondness for how the moon lit up dark nights."

I said nothing.

He continued. "I remember how the knights would fight for night patrol duties around the Royal Castle after word of her love of the moon got out. The ones lucky enough to come across her on patrol would take the chance to call out, "The moon is beautiful, isn't it?""

I remembered that as well. "The moon is beautiful, isn't it?" was a well-known phrase coined by a famous author, often used as a subtle and poetic romantic confession. Many knights who had feelings for her would use the phrase to profess their love while still being able to claim they were just remarking on the moon if things went poorly.

"Right, she never did realize their intentions," I said. "Always gave some benign reply in response. One time, she even came to me and noted that knights were such romantics because they all loved the moon so much. I was floored that she'd miss the mark so brilliantly. But...she never did understand how charming she was to others."

These days, Canopus was the only one I could talk about her with. The White Knight wouldn't have a thing to do with me anymore.

I looked over at him. He was looking at me with eyes full of worry. Really, he'd never *stopped* being deeply worried for me since that day. In all likelihood, he knew exactly what I was thinking of as I gazed at the moon. He was probably trying to make me put my thoughts into words, to make me lay bare my heart so that it could be eased. But I was not ready for that yet. Instead, I tried to change the topic. "What? Am I so interesting to look at?"

I was an open book to him, and so a brief look of sadness crossed his face. He blinked a few times to gather himself. "Ah hah...if I were a woman, perhaps I might've liked to indulge in gazing at your handsome features. Alas, as a man, I personally cannot find much enjoyment in the act." He let out a small sigh. "I wonder what that noble lady thought...and yes, I heard about it. You killed the daughter of a duke who snuck into your bedchamber to seduce you, eh?"

How shrewd. It had only happened a few days ago, yet he'd already caught wind of it. I suspected he also already knew what

really happened, given his information-gathering prowess, but it was worth denying things myself. “Rumors tend to get blown out of proportion. My knights stopped me before I could do any real harm.”

“In other words, you *would* have killed her if they didn’t stop you? That’s hardly better.” He tilted his head in exasperation, then looked up at the sky. “It’s a shame she couldn’t know beforehand how pointless her attempt was. It’s not as if Your Majesty has a heart left to be stirred any longer...”

I nodded. “Right. From that day, that moment, that instant onward—my heart has been broken. And it will likely remain so...” *For as long as she is gone*—I swallowed down the words, but Canopus seemed to pick them up regardless.

As though to prove it, he said, “Lady Serafina always did set her sights high. Even now I dream she might one day return and seal away the Demon Lord as she had hoped.”

I looked him up and down and sighed. “Is that why you’ve been training? To serve as her personal knight again? I doubt training will help you much in your dreams.”

But deep down, underneath my sarcasm, I felt he was right to believe. One needed hope in order to live. However faint the hope, it was enough if it could see you through tomorrow.

My sin was grave. I had to will myself onward with my desire for atonement...with the excuse I have made to justify living on. The only thing that kept me in this world was the hope that I’d one day avenge her and finish sealing what she couldn’t.

In truth...when I looked up at the moon on nights like this and thought of her, I felt the heart in me that should have been shattered into nothing...I felt it ache. But I reminded myself that a missing heart couldn’t possibly ache, and I shut my eyes to it all.

Interlude:

The Demon Lord's Right-Hand Man

“I IS LADY FI ASLEEP?” Kurtis asked with an inquiring look, having seen Zavilia return shortly after showing Fia her bed.

The group's long and drawn-out story sharing session came to an end after each member finished their turn. With their after-dinner party now over, they were each shown to their beds. It was practically a given that Fia would share the Black Dragon's bed. Kurtis was brought to a different bed a short distance away. Instead of sleeping, however, he left and waited outside for Zavilia in a wide, open clearing.

From what Zavilia said earlier, Kurtis guessed the dragon had some things he wanted to ask him one-on-one—and he was right. The dragon smiled, pleased that the man had picked up on his clues.

“Yep, fast asleep. All it takes is for me to turn small and climb onto her stomach. Then, boom, sleeping like a baby.” As though he thought nothing of it at all, the legendary, feared beast revealed that he was treated no differently than a stuffed plushie.

“Is that...so.” Kurtis didn't know how to respond to this information. Should he say something about Fia being too old for plushies, be happy the strongest of familiars was protecting her even as she slept, or what?

Zavilia watched the man think for a moment, then asked in a curious voice, **“Even now, I can see how devoted you are to your master. But honestly...people like you bring nothing but trouble. What kind of subordinate thinks for their master?”** Zavilia stretched his wings wide to intimidate the man.

Kurtis stared at the beautiful black wings glistening in the moonlight for a short time, then dropped his gaze to the ground. “You needn't threaten me. I am loyal to Lady Fi, always. The only thing I

want, from the bottom of my heart, is for her to be happy.” Still looking at the ground, he clenched his fists. “I apologize for what I said earlier. Saying you wouldn’t understand true loss wasn’t fair and leaves no room for argument.”

“No, it’s fine,” replied Zavilla nonchalantly. **“To be honest, I don’t care about anyone but Fia, and I certainly don’t care to guess the feelings of anyone but her. If there’s something you want to express to me, then tell me directly or I won’t understand.”**

Kurtis met Zavilia’s eyes. “Thank you for being so understanding. What you said earlier was right. Lady Fi’s sense of justice is true and pure; I should entrust all decisions to her. It is wrong of me to try to hide things from her and to misguide her thinking...” As Kurtis spoke, his expression grew more and more pained, as though he himself didn’t fully believe his own words. Practically pleading, he said, “But...but I cannot bring myself to *not* second-guess her! Yes, her decisions have always been right—they’ve been right for *three hundred years*—but...despite that, she still met such a grisly fate. It is my belief that she must allow herself to use others as a shield, to believe that she herself is worthy of protection. If she fails to do so, I fear that she will die young, just as she did all those years ago.”

Zavilia gave him a deeply wary look. **“Certainly, Fia’s death in her previous life was wrong.”** Expression unchanging, he continued, **“Let me ask you something.”**

“But of course...” *That is what I came here for, after all.*

Picking up even the bit left unsaid, Zavilia said, **“Right. Thank you for giving me your time.”** He folded back his intimidating wings and sat down.

Kurtis heaved a large sigh to calm himself, then interlaced his fingers before his chest. He spoke in a calmer voice once more. “Forgive my loss of composure. I was gazing at the moon as I waited

for you, but...its beauty brought back troubling memories. I apologize.” Softly, he continued, “As someone privy to Lady Fi’s thoughts, I’m sure you have many questions for me. Allow me to answer what I can.”

“You catch on quick. You weren’t the Great Saint’s personal knight for nothing,” Zavilia said, revealing he knew of their connection three hundred years ago.

Kurtis’s eyes widened slightly. “So you know that too,” he murmured. “Yes...I was Lady Fi’s personal knight. I’ve always taken pride in that fact and have spared no effort in serving her. Not then and not now.” Kurtis chose to confirm Zavilia’s words without hiding a thing.

Zavilia approved of his decision and murmured to himself, **“You’re decisive as well; it took you only a second to accept me as an ally. And you’re loyal. Even that gray-haired Royal Guard captain was happy to entrust the duty of personal knight to you.”**

Kurtis showed no sign that the dragon’s words disturbed him and kept his eyes locked on Zavilia. It seemed the dragon was subtly warning him to answer his coming question carefully—for there was nothing he could hide. “So, what did you wish to know? The fate of the gray-haired Royal Guard captain? Or something else?”

“Oh, I don’t care to know about him. Fia is still working through her own feelings on that matter. Hearing a third party’s account will only make the truth that much murkier for me. No, what I want to ask is something different.” Zavilia swished his tail to the side, then met Kurtis’s gaze directly. **“What I want to know is what you’re hiding from Fia. For some reason, you seem to believe Fia won’t survive if she herself doesn’t have a strong will to live.”**

Kurtis cast his gaze down. In a voice that betrayed no emotion, he said, “Yes, that’s correct. I...lack power. If Lady Fi doesn’t reach out for help of her own volition, I cannot aid her.”

“Hmph. Well, I suppose I understand. If someone were about to fall off a cliff, it makes all the difference whether or not they reach out their hand. But you’re stronger than Fia’s brothers were three hundred years ago, aren’t you? And the Demon Lord is already sealed, is it not? So why do you still have such misgivings? Just what are you worried about, hmm?”

Kurtis remained silent, biting his lip without giving an answer.

Zavilia waited for a moment. After understanding that no answer was coming, he tilted his head. **“I’m only asking you one thing: With the Demon Lord sealed away, exactly what is it that you fear?”**

Even then, Kurtis didn’t respond.

Zavilia finally cut to the chase. **“Fine. Let me change my phrasing, then. Just what in the world is the Demon Lord’s right-hand man?”**

Zavilia’s question seemed to catch Kurtis by complete surprise, the man’s eyes darting wide.

Zavilia paid him no mind. **“Through our connection, I was able to see the Demon Lord’s right-hand man when Fia was reminiscing about the past, but just what is he? I know there’s a chance her fear of death affected her memories, but...I don’t think she’d miscount the number of crests on him.”**

“You saw that much?” Kurtis’s eyes opened even wider. He sucked in a breath. He looked like he was about to say something but choked up instead.

Zavilia watched him calmly. He narrowed his eyes, as if suddenly understanding something. **“So it’s true, then. I see. I had thought it strange that Fia feared the likes of the Demon Lord’s**

underling, since she managed to seal away the Demon Lord. I could understand her being afraid when she was out of mana in her past life, but she has the same powers now as she did before. She may not have spirits by her side anymore, but she has me and a few half-decent knights beside her. Even if the right-hand man reappeared, she'd be fine this time...or so I had believed."

Kurtis neither confirmed nor denied Zavilia's words. Wide-eyed, he simply gulped.

Zavilia gradually put the pressure on. "At first, I let her abnormal fear go, thinking the experience of being killed was too traumatic for her. But one day, I began to have doubts. You see... Fia is incredibly calm when it comes to combat. I've never seen her fail to assess someone's strength, not once."

In a shaky voice, Kurtis said, "Indeed. Lady Fi's abilities as a saint are perfection itself." There was no information to be gleaned from his words, but it was clear Kurtis was trying his best to faithfully answer what he could.

Understanding this, Zavilia couldn't help but smile. "Right. She would never mistake someone's strength. Does that not mean the right-hand man is someone Fia cannot see herself *ever* overcoming?"

Kurtis remained silent again.

"I see. Your silence answers me." Seeing Kurtis grimace, Zavilia inwardly cursed how the worst had come to fruition. Calmly however, he asked once more to confirm that terrible truth. "So Fia's memories of the right-hand man were correct. He is...many times stronger than even the Demon Lord. Am I correct?"

Silently, obediently, Kurtis nodded.

Zavilia stretched his wings in irritation and swished his tail. "I see... I'm sure the proper thing to do here would be to discuss the implications of this in regards to the Book of Beginnings, but I'd rather keep things simple. Concisely, demons, like other

monsters, do not normally have crests. But occasionally, a powerful demon appears, and these powerful demons will *always* have a crest on them. I believe the proper term is ‘crest-bearing demon,’ correct?”

Kurtis slowly nodded. “Yes. Due to how rare and powerful they are, they have their own grouping, separate from other demons.”

“Right. And if I recall correctly, the number of crests these crest-bearing demons have signifies their strength. The Demon Lord Fia sealed away was called the Demon Lord of the Thirteen Crests, correct?”

“Correct. A single crest alone is enough to earn people’s fear. Bearing thirteen crests, the Demon Lord was feared by the whole world. That’s why everyone rejoiced when Great Saint Serafina sealed the Demon Lord away, but...”

Zavilia picked up from where Kurtis trailed off. “Normally, that’s where you’d go ‘And everyone lived happily ever after,’ but instead the Demon Lord’s underling appeared, right? And for some reason, that underling had twenty-, thirty-something crests on their body... How strange, that a demon with more crests than his own Demon Lord would appear.”

Kurtis bit his lip hard enough that it bled.

“Why, one might even speculate that *he* was the true Demon Lord.”

Side Story:
Clarissa, Captain of the Fifth Knight Brigade
Fia and Her Band of Merry Friends

I AM CLARISSA ABERNETHY, captain of the Fifth Knight Brigade, guardians of the Royal Capital. I've recently been intrigued by the drastic change occurring within the companions of one Fia Ruud, a new recruit in the First Knight Brigade.

The best of our best seem to congregate around her, and she somehow influences them adversely, causing them to do things they would otherwise never do. Just what in the world is going on?

With all due respect to the man, Commander Saviz was the first I noticed a change in. The Commander has always possessed an intimidating presence. He was perfect—*too* perfect, to the point of being unapproachable. He had the charisma, the looks, and the ability to lead the Knight Brigades, but he kept himself behind an insurmountable wall.

That was, until Fia came along. She intrigued him somehow; she was the first person he made an effort to know. Things were strange from the very start, from the moment the Commander volunteered to spar with Fia himself for the welcome ceremony exhibition match. It was unprecedented for a commander to partake in such an event, as it was generally kept between a new recruit and a knight a few years their senior. And, as I recall, he was visibly less intimidating than usual for the remainder of the day.

I was still reeling from the Commander's change when Quentin, captain of the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade, turned strange. He, who I had always believed cared about nothing but monsters, started following Fia around wherever she went, calling her "Miss Fia" all the while.

I was still left confused—no, creeped out—by his behavior, when the captains' meeting rolled by and I saw First Knight Brigade Captain Cyril fighting over Fia with Quentin. I found this strange as well—I was so certain that Cyril wasn't the type to fight over a woman—but any confusion I had was blown away by the shock of seeing the Commander himself watching everything unfold with interest.

I had to wonder yet again, just *what* did everyone see in her? Before I could come up with anything, Cyril dragged Fia to his territory and performed the knight's vow for her.

Why on earth would the captain of the most esteemed knight brigade perform the knight's vow for a fresh recruit?!

I had given up trying to understand anything at all by that point and decided to simply ask Fia what was going on. But, to my surprise, she returned from Sutherland with Thirteenth Knight Brigade Captain Kurtis.

Huh? She bagged another one?

What was more, Kurtis began following Fia around as though he were her personal knight of sorts. Just what in the world was going on?!

Which brought us to today. I was about to intervene in some trouble occurring in town when a man I'd never seen before stepped in. Fia claimed that he was just some acquaintance of hers, but I had a hard time believing things could be so simple. The clothes he wore were ordinary, but the way he handled himself was far more refined than any mere commoner. What's more, a hundred knights hid in the area to guard him, skilled enough at remaining incognito that I initially failed to notice them.

Considering I didn't recognize the man nor his brother who appeared thereafter, they had to be from another country. Curious about their identities, I introduced myself and received dry, expressionless replies in return.

Ah...so this is their usual disposition, then. They were expressive with Fia, quick to yell and blush, but that seemed to only extend to her.

I asked some leading questions and figured out they had come to the Kingdom just to see Fia. Perhaps the two had some ties to her? I tried to size them up more—but the more I did so, the more I became certain they were the kind of people generally not able to move about as they pleased. As the captain in charge of the Royal Capital's security, I met with His Majesty the King and the Commander frequently and had come to naturally recognize those with the air of a ruler...and rather problematically, I was sure I felt the same coming from those two men. Were they foreign royalty, then? If so, I could only hope they came from a small, distant country...

That was around the time Kurtis, Fia's ever-loyal knight, came running.

My, so keen! I had to wonder, though, exactly how had he known that things were astray? At first glance, there was nothing overtly unusual going on. It was just her talking to two men, and their high status shouldn't be immediately obvious. Maybe he took issue with men simply talking to Fia? But then how would she ever find love?

As I worried, Kurtis hid Fia behind his back as though to protect her from the two men.

Oh, he's more overprotective than I thought. Forget love—she might not even be able to make new friends at this rate...

Kurtis, despite having only just met the brothers, confidently stated they were from the Arteaga Empire.

They're royalty from the Arteaga Empire? Oh dear...why couldn't they have just been royalty from some small, distant country? Sheesh...

But could members of the Arteagian Imperial Family really just drop in on another country unannounced like this? And if Kurtis knew who they were, why was he so rude to them? Perhaps I'd misread the situation and they were closer to the level of a duke or a marquess,

but...either way, this was getting interesting! I couldn't wait to see how it played out...

That was when one of my subordinates came by. "Captain Clarissa! Viscount Gatter's son is causing problems in a central district restaurant. We require your assistance since we can't lay a hand on him!"

"Oh dear, and just when things were getting interesting here! Oh well. I better do the job I'm paid for. Until next time, Fia. And I leave the rest to you, Kurtis."

And so I went with my subordinate to the central district, quite disappointed that I'd be missing the best part of the ensuing scuffle between Kurtis and the two men.

I reached the restaurant in question and saw Viscount Gatter's son there, lifting a chair above his head and yelling. It seemed he'd been throwing a fit for quite some time. Overturned chairs and tables lay everywhere, as well as scattered cutlery and plates. Any other customers had long fled, and the staff huddled in a corner of the room watching helplessly from a safe distance.

At least I don't have to worry about anyone else getting hurt, I thought with relief as I approached the grown man who was throwing a fit. The moment he noticed me, he went red in the face and hurriedly set down the chair he'd almost heaved.

"W-w-well! If it isn't Lady Clarissa!"

"It's been a while. Mind telling me what the problem is this time?" My tone was a bit firmer than usual, since the viscount's son was a repeat offender.

He squirmed as he made his excuse. "Oh, it's terrible, Miss Clarissa! This restaurant keeps serving me sour food even after I *expressly* told them not to! And to think I so kindly deigned to dine here for one of my five daily meals! Oh, the *horror!*"

"You're obviously at fault here!" I whacked him hard on

the head.

“Ack, aieeeee!” He clutched his injury and collapsed, looking up at me in tears, but I had no sympathy for him today. Not when he’d made me lose out on some quality entertainment.

“Ah, heck...I missed seeing new members join Fia’s band of merry friends, all because you acted up!”

“H-huh? Band of merry friends...?” the viscount’s son repeated, confused.

In contrast, the knights with me murmured amongst themselves understandingly.

“Band of merry friends, huh? While I mean no disrespect to the other captains...it fits.”

“Yep. They’re her band of merry friends, without a doubt.”

I overheard my knights and thought, *Tsk, tsk. Why stop at just the captains?* They seemed to only consider the captains stationed in the Royal Capital to be part of Fia’s band of merry friends, but as I had more contact with the Commander, I could tell firsthand that even he had long since begun to change under her influence. Who could say? At this rate, Fia might even add His Majesty the King to her band of merry friends after meeting him post-vacation. She’d already added two members of Arteagian royalty (or perhaps they were nobility?) to her band, after all. My knights had no clue just how big the scope of Fia’s band of merry friends was, or how big it might grow!

I thought back to Fia’s words. *“...is what you’d think I’d say, but my sure-fire pick to win is actually Commander Saviz!”* She’d spoken so casually, thoroughly unaware of the importance of these figures congregating around her.

“Ha ha...she’ll definitely cause a stir one of these days. I see trouble in our future.” Privately, though, I was sure that despite all the troubles she’d bring, she’d bring twice that in fun.

That’s just the way she is, I thought with a smile.

Side Story:

Oria, Older Sister—My Little Fia

I'M ORIA RUUD, second child and oldest daughter of the Ruud knight family. I currently protect the far north of the Kingdom as a knight.

My little sister sent me a letter saying she'd use her vacation to come visit me all the way from the Royal Capital. The idea of us being able to see each other after so long was wonderful! The rest of the letter revealed that she wasn't visiting just for fun but also for work purposes, and would be joined by Captain Kurtis of the Thirteenth Knight Brigade.

She's really a knight now, huh? Keenly feeling the passage of time, I thought back to when she used to be little.

"Oria, Oria, look! I can hold a sword now!" Fia smiled broadly on the day she was finally able to use the children's practice sword that our older brother Ardio had once used. She was already six, a full three years behind the age the rest of us could wield a sword, but she was happy regardless.

"Waaaaaaah!" When she turned seven, she cried behind our home, having lost a sparring match against someone else her age who only started training a month ago. I was so flustered, unsure of what I could do to comfort her. Before I knew it, however, she stopped crying, roughly rubbed her eyes, and walked briskly off my way. I didn't have enough time to hide, so she ran into me then flashed me a teary-eyed smile, unaware that I had seen her cry. I couldn't help but laugh then, finding both her childish attempt at hiding her tears and her gap-toothed grin adorable.

Fia was so cute as a child. She was also the only one among our siblings who grew up without knowing our mother. Despite that, my

father and my brothers showed her no love—they were idiots who cared only for strength. They ignored her just because her skill with the sword was a little below the rest of the family's, which was totally unfair. Even when I warned them to start treating her better, my father, Dolph, was the only one who made the slightest effort to talk to her, and he only went three minutes before forgetting his objective and losing interest. I understood that he was busy with his vice-captain duties, and with being stationed in the west, but he could've at least tried to talk to her more when he visited home. He was a vice-captain *and* a father, wasn't he? Those were both duties, and he was failing one of them.

That being said, I heard he recently talked to Fia a little bit. Apparently, the sword he gifted her for passing her coming-of-age ceremony turned out to be a magic sword, and one with a never-before-seen enchantment too. The sword was ultimately offered to the Kingdom, and the armory it was found in was searched to check for other, similarly rare items. For a while I wondered what a magic sword was doing in our home. But, knowing my absent-minded father, he probably found it somewhere, didn't realize what it was, and just tossed it in the armory with the other weapons. In any case, he and Fia had a meal together after that to discuss what happened, so... perhaps they were closer now?

Either way, the biggest problem was our older brother, Ardio. He was an excellent knight and a strong swordsman, but he was too obsessed with improving himself. Since Fia wasn't that great with the sword, he took no interest in her. Rather, he didn't acknowledge her presence at all. Leon, the second son, had no interest in Fia either, but that was more because he was copying Ardio. If Ardio changed, so would he.

Somehow, Fia did what we all thought impossible and became a knight. What's more, she was granted the highest honor for a knight: the chance to spar with the commander, Saviz. I was sure Ardio and Leon would warm up to Fia soon enough.

I finally saw Fia again when she arrived in the north. We hadn't met since her coming-of-age ceremony, so it'd been a long while. I was seeing her in a knight uniform for the first time, and she had an adorable feather hair accessory on.

The blue knight uniform looks so good on her! I can't believe she's really a knight now, I thought with pride. The little girl was all grown up!

She was accompanied by Captain Kurtis and two other fine knights. The two knights spoke to me with exceeding politeness, clearly due to my relation to Fia.

"I'm impressed you managed to get such well-built knights so taken with you, Fia! You're a little on the smaller end, so I've always thought it'd be good for you to have someone bigger nearby." Elated, I spoke my true thoughts.

The men named Green and Blue looked back at me bashfully. I could tell they cared about Fia.

"Take care of her for me," I continued. "She may not stand out much, but she's the kind of girl that never gives up, no matter how many setbacks she runs into. She's wonderful, and I'm sure you two are wonderful as well to realize that. Hee hee! I'm glad my sister's worth is finally being recognized."

The two men returned earnest looks and agreed that Fia was wonderful. I couldn't help but smile. *My little Fia's grown and found people she can trust.*

I looked out the window at that towering mountain, Blackpeak. The mountain's lord, the black dragon, flitted into my mind. Fia was probably not just here to see me but to check up on her familiar as well. It was strange to think the legendary monster was merely a friend to Fia, one she could pop in on just because she wanted to know how it was doing. Her kindness must have won the black dragon over, probably from when she fed it a healing potion to heal its

injuries. I was sure her kindness would reach many more in the future.

That night, Fia and I slept in the same bed. She snuggled up close to me, perhaps because she was still a bit scared from what happened earlier with Captain Guy. As strange as it was, I felt a little relieved to see she was still scared of the word *demon*, despite having the one and only black dragon as her familiar. It showed me she was still the little girl I knew.

I reassured her that there was no rush to grow up, and together we talked about when she was young.

“You used to get lost all the time. Not that *you* considered yourself lost, but you still had everyone looking for you all the same. This one time when you were five, we spent two hours searching for you only to find you sleeping in a potato basket!”

We laughed a bit, chatted a bit, and eventually she went quiet. She was fast asleep, eyes fallen tightly shut before I knew it. As I watched her for a moment, she quietly murmured something about a star.

“Sirius...you’re too dazzling...”

I laughed. “How are you dreaming about stars when we were just reminiscing about when you were little?”

I pulled the blanket higher over her and settled down myself. I watched her a little bit more and saw her smile. *She must be having a nice dream*, I thought warmly. As though in reply, she opened her mouth, but what came out wasn’t my name but the names of yet more stars.

“Canopus... I beg you, please be a little more flexible. Vega, Capella... At least try to be reasonable...”

It was amusing to listen to her strange pleas to the stars. Dream logic was really something else. I couldn’t see what her comments had to do with those stars, but I supposed everything made sense in her mind.

My cute little Fia. You may be a knight now, but I will always be your big sister. If you ever need somebody, I'm here for you.

I poked her soft cheek with my finger. Sleepily, I mumbled, “If you’re ever in trouble or feel like you’re all worn out, will you return to me?”

In reply, she cutely said, “Of course. The stars will always be there to light up the way home... I love you, my dear sister...”

I giggled, then snuggled closer to her warm body and soon fell asleep.

Side Story:

Quentin, Captain of the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade

Does Zavilia's Horn Count as a Bribe?

WHY DOES KURTIS get to be “Fia’s Minder”?! Why not me?! We’re both captains, so why can’t I be the one?! It’s not fair!

Screaming internally, I opened up the chest in my office and pulled out the black dragon scales Miss Fia so graciously gave me. I cradled them in my arms and sat down on my sofa. No matter how long I looked at them, they remained just as beautiful as when I first saw them. I laid them on my lap and began to calm down, though I still fumed inside, dwelling bitterly upon my colleague Kurtis.

Kurtis and I had known each other for quite some time now. Three years ago he was a part of the First Knight Brigade, so we would frequently work together in the Royal Capital. He was affable, tactful, and had a strong sense of duty to make up for his slight weakness. For those reasons, I agreed with Cyril’s decision to make him captain of the Sutherland area...but he’d changed. He was a completely different person after returning from Sutherland. Just as polite as he was before, sure, but he had a clear, calm confidence now. The aura I saw around him hadn’t changed, but something told me that he was stronger now, as strange as that was. But the most drastic change of all was that he became a devotee of Miss Fia.

Kurtis abandoned his post in Sutherland as captain of the Thirteen Knight Brigade just to stay with her. Naturally, all the other captains were in shock when we heard, particularly Desmond and Zackary, but no amount of pleading could get Kurtis to reconsider. Eventually, everyone just gave up and began calling him “Fia’s Caregiver.” (Clarissa seemed to think there was something romantic

going on between the two, but it was very obvious to everyone else that this wasn't the case.)

From the day they returned onward, I saw Kurtis trailing behind Miss Fia wherever she went.

I get why you would want to be by her side...but I was first! It's not fair you get to hog her all to yourself! I thought. *Fine. Whatever. The Black Dragon King's returned to Blackpeak Mountain anyway, so I don't care.*

Really, though, I was just licking my wounds.

Around that time, I heard that Miss Fia was visiting Blackpeak Mountain. At once, I bolted into Cyril's office. He was sitting across from Zackary in a meeting, but I burst into the room anyway.

He raised an eyebrow, giving me a puzzled look. "Is something the matter, Quentin? It's not often you pay me a visit."

I walked straight up to him. "Why does Kurtis get to join Miss Fia on her visit to Blackpeak Mountain? It's not fair! I understand someone as great as her should be shared with everyone, but *I'm* the captain of the Monster Tamer Brigade! If anyone should be brought along to visit the Black Dragon King, it's me!"

He went wide-eyed for a moment, but he quickly returned to his usual calm look. "What do you mean? Fia is just visiting her older sister in the north."

It would, of course, take more than that to trick me. "Oh, so she's *not* going to visit the Black Dragon King while she's there? Are you sure about that? Are you sure enough to go with *me* to Blackpeak Mountain instead if you're wrong? Of course not! Because *you know* it's an entirely done deal that she's going to visit the Black Dragon King! You do realize that the Black Dragon King personally requested I protect Miss Fia, right?! I'm going with her no matter what!"

"Quentin, calm down. The Royal Capital won't be secure with you away for an extended period of time," he said rather worriedly, his mask of composure slipping.

But I was in no mood to calm down. “What are you talking about?! The Royal Capital will be fine with you, Desmond, and Zackary here to protect it! You really have no idea how badly I want to see the Black Dragon King, do you?! Just how long do you think it’s been since I last met him? I...” Mid-speech, I realized something important. “Ah, shoot! I *have* to go with Miss Fia or I’m screwed! If she visits the Black Dragon King and I’m not there, he’ll think I’m not fulfilling my duty to protect her, even though I’m being compensated!”

“Compensated? You were paid to protect Fia?” he said, sounding perplexed.

Feeling haughty, I looked down on him from above. “Aha ha ha ha! Listen and be amazed! As payment for my protection over Miss Fia, the Black Dragon King gave me its horn, the very same beautiful horn you saw yourself not so long ago!”

“Wait...but that’s bribery!” He stood with a start. “It is already a captain’s duty to protect their own. To prioritize protecting one over others in exchange for a reward is an infringement of our rules!”

“Ha ha ha ha, don’t be stupid! The Black Dragon King deemed Miss Fia’s protection worth the price of his horn! It’d have been rude of me to refuse, tantamount to questioning his judgment!”

“While it is a noble act to protect your own, it is not an act that should expect a reward! The truth is, you simply wanted the horn for yourself, didn’t you?!”

Ever the astute man, Cyril correctly saw my greed. But I wasn’t about to admit any fault. “Oh, like you’re in any position to talk! You swore to be Miss Fia’s knight just to gain the trust of the people of Sutherland! Is their trust not also a form of compensation?!”

Cyril bit his lip in frustration, having no argument he could make.

Zackary, who’d been quiet up until then, cut in. “Not bad, Quentin! Taking something as intangible as the trust of the people and

putting it on the same level as a real, priceless item was quite bold, but it worked! Cyril's got no ground to fight on." He grinned. "But I think you forgot one thing. The Black Dragon King actually gave that horn to *both* of us. Oh, and of course I fully intend to protect Fia too."

Don't think I don't see what you're doing, Zackary! You're trying to claim your share, now that it's looking like the Black Dragon King's horn won't count as bribery. That's dirty! I did all the hard work!

"But wait, you use greatswords, right?!" I replied. "If we made a greatsword out of the horn for you, there'd be hardly anything left for *me!*" Inadvertently, my true thoughts slipped out.

Cyril glared at me. "So you are just after the black dragon's horn after all."

The three of us continued to argue and glare at one another until there was a knock at the door. We looked over and saw Miss Fia open the door and pop her head through.

"Pardon my intrusion, Captain Cyril. I'm looking for Captain Quentin, but I can't... Oh, there you are."

"Miss Fia! You were looking for me?! It's an honor!"

"I'm sorry for interrupting you all while you're so busy, I just wanted to ask Captain Quentin for something."

"Miss Fia! Wants to ask! *Me!* For something?! Please, ask away! I'll keep watch outside your door through the night, pluck all the weeds out of the yard in front of the women's dormitory, absolutely anything at all!"

With an unfaltering smile, she said, "I don't need anything like that. I was just wondering if I could have a few of your familiar's feathers. I was thinking I could maybe make a hair accessory for my trip to Blackpeak Mountain with it."

"You want to use my griffon's feathers to dress up for your meeting with the Black Dragon King?! *Eeeek!* I'm so honored, I might keel over and die on the spot!"

“Please don’t die so easily.”

Happy to hear that Miss Fia cared about my well-being, I eagerly left the room. Behind me, I heard Cyril and Zackary sigh in exasperation, but I had no more business with them so I closed the door without looking back.

As we walked alongside one another, I said, “Miss Fia, I heard you’re departing for Blackpeak Mountain with Kurtis. Please allow me to join you!”

She blinked a few times in surprise. “Er...but if you come, all the familiars at the familiar stables will be lonely. Plus, my sister will think it’s super weird if two captains come along. Besides, I was planning on bringing you back something special as a souvenir, but there’s no point to that if you’re already coming along.”

The moment I heard those last words, I shouted. “I retract my request! I shall remain here to protect the Royal Castle!”

“Huh? Uh, okay...?”

How could I forget? Only those who don’t go on trips get souvenirs. What’s more, she said she’d bring me something special! Well, I’ll just have to wait here then, won’t I?

Without a deeper thought or ulterior motive, I happily chose not to go with Fia.

At the same time in Cyril’s room, two captains both heaved a sigh.

“The black dragon’s horn absolutely counts as a bribe.”

“Aw, don’t say that. Sure, Quentin was nasty about it, but if you think of him as a child happy to get a toy he wanted, he’s actually kinda cute, yeah? I’m getting a new sword out of this too, so could you look the other way just this once?”

“Did you really just ask me, the captain of the First Knight Brigade who upholds the Brigades’ morals, to be so corrupt as to ‘look

the other way’?”

“Y’know, despite what Quentin said, there should still be some horn left over after making two swords. We could use it to make you a... Right, you’re above receiving bribes. Oh! We could use it to make a few short swords for the Commander. How about it?”

“*Hmph*...very well, then. This conversation never happened.” Cyril quickly folded at the mention of his adored commander.

And so, the great debate over whether Zavilia’s horn truly counted as a bribe or not ended inconclusively, as it had “never happened.”

Side Story:

The Great Saint Disguises Herself as a Knight to Attend the Captains' Meeting (Three Hundred Years Ago)

IT ALL STARTED with Canopus telling me he had to attend the captains' meeting.

"The captains' meeting?" I, Serafina Náv, batted my eyes in confusion at the mention of the term.

With a dour expression, he said, "Indeed. I've been asked to attend this afternoon. I'll have to leave your side for a few hours, however. Would that be acceptable?"

I cocked my head, genuinely perplexed. Canopus was part of my Royal Red Shield, which was independent from the Knight Brigades. Why would he need to attend one of their meetings?

"Of course I don't mind," I said, "but...the captains' meeting is that one meeting where all the captains in the Royal Capital gather under Commander Wezen's orders, right? Why would a knight of my Royal Guard be called to their meeting?"

"As I understand it, the High Council has some things to report at the meeting about your failure to arrive at the Barbizet duchy. As your personal knight, I'm to attend to speak."

"Th-the High Council?! The Barbizet duchy?!" I jolted up from my chair.

W-wait, wait, wait, wait! Could this perhaps be...my fault somehow? I felt my face pale. Oh, gosh, it is! This is all because I abandoned my responsibility to go to the Barbizet duchy and went to Sutherland instead! Sure, I saved a bunch of sick people, but the fact remains that I shirked my duty...

I had already been scolded once and at length by my brother Vega, the Council's representative, for breaking the schedule they

planned for me. In fact, he went so far as to rudely pretend to mistake me for a dirty maidservant and accused me of having gone to Sutherland for a little swim with my favorite knights despite knowing I really went there to save people...but Sirius had barged into the room right then, ready to take my side unconditionally, as he always did.

He surprised Vega—the first prince himself!—with new information that made it seem like my decision to change course was correct. He then went a step further and insisted that this meant the High Council made a faulty decision and that *they* should be apologizing to *me* for covering for them. My decision didn't actually have nearly that much thought behind it, but Sirius spoke so forcefully that there was no arguing otherwise.

I stopped reminiscing and gasped—of course! The High Council wanted to use this coming meeting to refute Sirius's words!

I thought for a moment, came up with a brilliant plan, and clapped my hands together. "I've got it! Canopus! I get that they're calling for you because you went with me to Sutherland, but nobody could possibly understand why I did what I did better than me, right?"

"That is...perhaps the case?" Canopus gave me a wary, uncertain look.

"Then I should attend the meeting!" I exclaimed. "Maybe this wouldn't have been a big deal if Sirius hadn't said anything, but all these problems started with me. It's only right that I bear any criticism myself!"

Calmly, Canopus pushed back against my suggestion. "What a... *wonderful* idea. Unfortunately, the meeting is this afternoon. There is not enough time to obtain approval for the Great Saint to attend. I'm afraid you'll have to sit this one out."

Seeing how smoothly he said those words, I realized, *Hey, wait a second... He planned for this exact scenario!* Canopus knew his schedule many weeks in advance, so it was weird that he'd wait until the very

last moment to bring up the fact that he would attend the captains' meeting. He probably withheld the information knowing I might try to come along so he could use the short notice as an excuse to refuse.

Well, if you're going to play it like that... I looked up at him with a cherubic smile as I presented my *next* brilliant plan. "If I can't go as the Great Saint, then I'll disguise myself as a knight and go as your assistant."

"I'm...sorry?"

"Oh, wow, would you look at the time? I need to hurry up and prepare!" I said with false surprise. I then asked a maid on standby in the room to prepare a woman's knight uniform and a wig.

"Er, L-Lady Serafina, I don't think—"

"Oh, so sorry, Canopus. I'm about to change, so could you step out of the room? I'll let you know when I'm finished."

"I do not recommend—L-Lady Serafinaaaa!"

My maids pushed Canopus out of the room and slammed the door shut.

Heh heh heh! Silly Canopus. You thought you could just leave me out as you solved my problems for me? Well, you thought wrong!

Soon enough, my maid brought me the knight uniform. I changed into it, capping it off with a gray wig that reached my shoulders.

My, oh, my. This gray hair, golden eyes look is certainly a breath of fresh air. And I look like a knight through and through! My disguise is perfect! I nodded my head happily as I checked myself out in the mirror.

I left the room and joined Canopus in the corridor. His eyes went wide the moment he saw me. Yep, I know, Canopus: You can hardly tell it's me!

"Surprised? I look just like a knight, don't I? Everyone associates me with red hair, so nobody will have a clue it's me if I just change

my hair color!”

“Come again? Whatever gave you that impression? With your face and your eye color the same, there isn’t a single soul who would mistake you for anyone other than yourself! How you think you’re disguised at all genuinely confounds me...”

Oh, c’mon. You can only tell because you’re always with me, but the other knights will be none the wiser! Quit exaggerating! I trailed shortly behind him like an assistant. As we walked along, however, I began to reconsider. *Hmm...he might have a point after all.* There were a number of knights I knew fairly well that might recognize me. Figuring it never hurt to be extra careful, I tilted my head forward so my bangs hid my eyes. I checked myself in the glass window and saw I looked nothing like my usual self. I grinned broadly. *Wow, I’ve really outdone myself this time! My perfect disguise is now even more perfect!*

That was when I noticed Canopus was sneaking worried glances at me over his shoulder. Thinking I was certain to stand out if the Blue Knight himself gave me such attention, I quickly warned him. “Master Canopus, please keep your eyes forward. If you keep looking back at me like that, people are going to wonder.”

“M-Master Canopus?!” My over-serious knight seemed to find himself hung up on what I called him for some reason.

“Yes, *Master* Canopus. Now please focus so you don’t give away my identity. C’mon, eyes forward.”

After I warned him again, he obeyed and walked forward. Meekly, he said, “With all due respect, I’d like to express that I did not in any way agree to this. I am in no position to question Your Highness’s decisions, only begrudgingly comply. I only ask that you not rock the boat any more than need be.”

For some reason, he seemed to be under the impression my identity was sure to be outed. *What a worrywart*, I thought, but I didn’t argue. “Don’t worry,” I reassured him. “I’m a pacifist. I won’t go picking fights or anything!”

He swallowed audibly, seeming to have no faith in me at all. That didn't quite sit right with me, but seeing as he was allowing me to tag along, I overlooked it.

I can't just let myself be protected by Sirius forever! I'll handle my own problems and give Sirius some peace!

Full of determination, I trailed behind Canopus, keeping my head slightly tilted forward.

We arrived at the meeting room to find only a few people there—the rest hadn't arrived yet. There was a massive round table in the middle of the room with twenty-or-so chairs situated around it, but only four were filled.

Come to think of it, I attended a captains' meeting with Sirius when I was younger, didn't I? I thought back to the time nostalgically.

While I basked in memory, Canopus—clearly trying to lie low—briskly moved to sit in a chair far away from the four others. Unfortunately, one of the men didn't seem to like him acting so distant and stood up.

"Hey, it's been a while," the man casually called out, walking over with a hand on his hip. I didn't recognize him, so I looked him up and down to size him up. He was well built and seemed fairly sharp.

A veteran knight, no doubt. Judging from the fact he's at this meeting, he must be a captain, and a fairly strong one at that. As he talked to Canopus, I met his eyes.

"You're too antisocial for your own good, Canopus! Sure, I respect you're dedicating your life to serving Her Holiness—and yes, I would kill to swap places with you—but there's no reason you can't socialize more every now and...and... Wh-wh-whaaah?!" For some reason, the moment he met my eyes, he jumped in surprise, his golden blond hair standing on end.

"C-C-C-Canopus, what the hell are you thinking?! Oh! C-c-c-could this perhaps be a reward—*my* reward for defeating that S-rank

monster the other day?! Wow-oh-wow, I can't believe I'm so close to her! She's so precious, I could die! And she's wearing *our* knight uniform, ahhh! Th-this is it for me, everyone! I'm about to ascend!"

"Open those eyes of yours fully for once and look again, Hadar. What she's wearing is the red uniform of the Royal Guard, not the same uniform as yours," said Canopus calmly, a sharp departure from the nonsensical ravings of this Hadar guy.

Canopus then slowly stood up and nonchalantly stepped between me and Hadar, blocking his view of me.

Hadar grabbed Canopus's shoulders hard. "What do you think you're doing?! Move it! You know just how much I want to see her right now! *Move it!* Do not deprive me of this divine gift!"

I looked at the two of them, confused. What were they fighting about? Did Canopus step in front of me because he didn't want me to see how weird the man was? I remember he warned me not to approach any knights outside of the Royal Red Shield, as knights were antisocial and peculiar people, but this man sure seemed social to me—not that I could understand what he was saying through what sounded like some "knight lingo."

Perhaps not wanting to be left out of whatever the two were talking about, or perhaps to lend Canopus a helping hand and pull Hadar away, the other three knights stood up and came over.

"What's got you so up in arms, huh, Hadar?"

"I know it's weird seeing this Great Saint devotee with a woman for once, but you don't have to tease him so much for it."

"Oh my, though, what unusual features she has. Gray hair is just so uncommon. I can't help but be reminded of the tyrannical and powerful Red Royal Guard captain him...self..."

The three captains chatted away as they approached but trailed off once they neared. They stared at me without saying a word, as if they expected something of me. Any regular-old knight must be required to introduce themselves to their superiors, I realized—so I

raised my gaze and met their eyes. “Nice to meet you, I am Sera—ah, Sera... Seraphi, acting as Master Canopus’s assistant.”

Several moments of silence passed before the four captains—including Hadar—abruptly broke into hysterics.

“Whaaaaaaaaat?! C-C-C-C-C-Canopus?!”

“Sh-sh-she, she spoke to me! I’m ascending! I’m ascending!”

“You’re kidding me, right? I just got back from a monster extermination expedition! Argh, why didn’t I change my clothes?! I-I don’t smell, do I? Please don’t say I smell! I might just die out of shame.”

“Sh-she’s wearing it! The...the uniform! I can’t believe my eyes! No riches could compare to such a sight! Her Holiness is the most precious thing in the world!”

For some mysterious reason, all four of these captains seemed to turn hysterical at once. I watched them with my jaw hanging open and my mind whirling. From my side, Canopus made an annoyed face and shooed them away.

“Leave us be. This ‘knight’ here volunteered to come and... advise me as I gave my testimony today. That is all.”

The eyes of the captains went wide.

“She’s here as *a knight*, you say? Oh, that’s right! The High Council was going to speak today! I understand what you mean to say, Canopus. Someone of her social status cannot attend this meeting so freely, after all.”

“W-wait...so I’ll be able to hear her speak her thoughts from up close?!”

“Oh, what a glorious day today is! I’ll remember this meeting for the rest of my life!”

“I’ve been a captain for almost two years now, but I’ve never been blessed with such an honor. How strange. I feel as though the air itself tastes better than usual right now.”

The captains pulled chairs out from the round table and lined them up behind Canopus, all of them racing to be first.

“M-Miss Seraphi, it’s a rule of ours to have assistants sit behind the one they are assisting. Please, feel free to use this chair.”

“Wh-what he said, Miss Seraphi. Please, feel free to sit here as well.”

“M-Miss Seraphi...whoa, I said her name...oh, p-please feel free to use this chair too, if you’d like.”

“M-Miss Seraphi, isn’t the air rather delicious today?”

I found myself unable to refuse the oddly earnest captains, so I thanked them and nervously sat in one of their chairs. Then they all sat next to Canopus, abandoning their original seats.

Canopus frowned. “Get away from us, all of you! And don’t think I didn’t notice how you all took advantage of the situation to call her by a nickname! Cease this nonsense at once!”

The captains only scooted closer and, somehow in unison, said, “Never! At least let us be as close to her as possible! We might never get a chance like this again!” They all looked deadly serious, and their cheeks were flushed. For some reason, they were losing it with excitement.

I thought back to Canopus’s words again. While I didn’t agree with what he said about knights being antisocial, I could see they certainly had some peculiar customs shared only among themselves.

The time for the meeting came, so Wezen, the commander of the Knight Brigades, was shown in. He scanned the room as he entered and raised an eyebrow in surprise. With some exasperation, he said, “Why are you all bunched together on the same end of the table?”

I had the same question.

Many other captains had entered the room while we waited for meeting time. Each and every one of them were initially like, “What

the heck are you all doing?” when they saw us. But the instant they saw me, they gasped, pulled up a chair, and were all like “Me too!” In the end, the side of the table facing the entrance was crammed like sardines, while the far end was left empty.

Knights have just the darndest customs, don't they? I then saw the man standing behind Wezen and cast my gaze down. *Huh?! Wh-what's Sirius doing here?!* I'd only seen him for an instant, but there was no mistaking it—that was definitely Sirius.

Wezen and Sirius passed behind me while I kept my head down. They sat at the far, empty end of the table. There was some distance between us, but I didn't dare lift my gaze as we directly faced each other. No, not as things were right now. The captains saw me and seemed to pick up on my desire to hide, as the ones sitting in front of me sat up straight and formed a tight wall with their massive frames. I couldn't see Sirius at all anymore. I let out a sigh of relief, and so the meeting began.

I kept my head down at the start. As time passed, though, I grew more confident I wouldn't be spotted and began sneaking peeks from behind the captains. I saw Sirius talking and thought he looked oddly used to doing so. From the other captains' lack of surprise, I got the sense that Sirius was a regular at these meetings.

They finished going over the budget and the month's schedule, then announced they would be moving on to the final item on the agenda. They called in the envoy from the High Council. My older brother Rigel—the third prince—walked in. A seat was prepared for him near Sirius and Wezen.

Canopus was called to speak. I moved with him as well, taking care to remain directly behind him. For some reason, however, all the captains around us stood up together with us and moved while maintaining an enclosure around me. The knights accompanying those captains formed an outer, secondary ring as we moved, meaning our group numbered around thirty.

With an icy look, Sirius off-handedly remarked, “How interesting, Canopus. Our esteemed captains seem to be acting as something of an entourage for you, treating you as though you were the Great Saint herself.”

For an instant, I thought Sirius was being sarcastic and had figured out I was present, but I quickly reconsidered. There was clearly no way he could know I was there. I was, after all, completely hidden behind a wall of captains. *Phew. Don't scare me with your jokes like that, Sirius!*

Rigel looked with disbelief at Canopus and the group moving with him. Once they stopped only a few steps away, Rigel grimaced. “Hmph. Did you all intend to intimidate me by approaching as a group in such muscle-flaunting clothing?”

“Not at all,” said one of the captains flatly. “These are regulation-standard knight uniforms, and we all came closer simply so we could hear Your Highness better.”

Rigel looked over all the captains and scoffed, then, in an arrogant tone, said, “I come bearing the High Council’s reply to Royal Red Shield Captain Sirius’s doubts on the necessity of the Great Saint’s dispatch to the Barbizet duchy!” Wezen wordlessly nodded, prompting my brother to continue. “As you all surely know, the Great Saint is only ever mobilized to handle issues no one else can. However, the Duchess of Barbizet was able to step in as acting saint for Barbizet’s monster extermination, casting doubt over the High Council’s decision to mobilize the Great Saint at all.”

The captains around me loudly murmured among themselves, quite obviously meaning to be overheard. “Oh, you don’t say?” “Sounds like the High Council screwed up to me.”

Rigel gritted his teeth, then yelled over them. “To cut to the point, our decision was *right*! Things went well in the Barbizet duchy only because Master Sirius stepped in. With his presence, it’s a given that blue dragons would be quickly dispatched—Great Saint or no

Great Saint! And as there is no knowing how things would have gone without him, the High Council has concluded the decision to send the Great Saint cannot be considered faulty!”

An uncomfortable silence followed. Begrudgingly, everyone had to admit the logic was sound. The captains murmured amongst themselves again, this time quietly.

“Yeah...”

“Captain Sirius is crazy strong...”

“Can’t argue with that...”

Canopus wore a complex expression, a mixture of displeasure at this turn of events and happiness at hearing someone praise Sirius’s strength.

The one to break the uncomfortable silence was Sirius himself. “In that case,” he said flatly, “the High Council should have ordered me to go instead. I see no reason the Great Saint should be made any busier than she already is.”

Rigel’s eyes darted wide as he looked at Sirius. Tentatively, he said, “H-huh? B-but, uh, aren’t you far busier th-than...” He didn’t have the heart to finish while meeting Sirius’s gaze, but we all knew what he meant to say. It was a well-known fact that Sirius turned down any and all requests made of him by the other brigades and organizations, claiming he had his hands full already as captain of the Great Saint’s Royal Guard.

Of course, it was true that he was constantly busy. Not only did he perfectly fulfill his duty as captain of my Royal Guard, but he also handled many other duties—like attending this captains’ meeting, for instance. And yet, despite knowing how impossible it was for him to fit any more work onto his plate, Sirius still pretended as though that wasn’t the case. “Nonsense. There’s no way I could ever be busier than the Great Saint. From the next incident onward, whenever there’s a matter where I can stand in for her, come to me instead.”

Rigel gave him a long, blank look. “O-oh, okay...will do...”

Judging from the look on his face, he understood Sirius didn't mean what he said. If the High Council was to ever bring something up to Sirius, he'd probably—no, *definitely*—turn them down, as usual. In fact, everyone listening knew Sirius's words were meaningless and looked at him with lukewarm expressions because of it.

Oh, Sirius, you goof, I thought with exasperation.

Offhandedly, Sirius then remarked, "Thank you for coming today, Canopus. If there's anything you—or that gray-haired knight accompanying you—want to say, then go ahead and do so now."

"Hwah?!" A strange noise escaped my lips. *How'd he know I was here if I've been hidden this whole time? Did he notice me when he entered the room? But who bothers to remember such a plain-looking assistant?*

"I can't help but notice your gray hair matches mine," he said. "I'm honored you'd choose that color." He turned to face me as though he knew exactly where I was, even behind my captain wall.

Perhaps feeling pressured to move, the captains in front of me parted slightly, making my face visible. I looked up and saw Sirius's eyes were locked directly onto mine. His expression remained impassive, but something told me the jig was up. Seeing no point in trying to hide any longer, I spoke. "Uhh, all right. Allow me to speak, then."

The captains spun around to face me, all starry-eyed. Perhaps they were impressed by how I was taking the plunge and responding to Sirius.

I felt a little fidgety with everyone looking at me, but nervously continued on. "I believe the Great Saint—er, Her Holiness—is sorry she changed her schedule without warning. But I also believe she'd be thankful if she had a bit more say in her scheduling, as she'd like to save as many people as possible."

I thought I was pretty polite about it, but Rigel seemed to take issue with my words, even though Sirius had just talked him down moments ago. A vein bulged on his forehead as he raised his voice.

“Hah! As if she’d have such noble aspirations in her! That girl went to Sutherland to go for a swim with all her handsome young knights while Master Sirius was risking life and limb against monsters!”

“Wh-what?!” I exclaimed. What Rigel said was entirely untrue! I recalled one of my other brothers, First Prince Vega, had claimed the same thing. It seemed the false rumor was spreading somehow. “I did no such thing! Ah, I mean Her Holiness! Her Holiness did no such thing!”

No sooner did I deny the accusation did the captains around me start leaking bloodlust toward my brother.

“Your Highness Rigel, I implore you to take more care with what you say! A knight might think you were mocking Her Holiness and inadvertently draw their blade.”

“Her Holiness went to Sutherland and saved countless people! She had to travel for days without sleeping! How dare you accuse her of simply going for a swim!”

“H-huh?” Blankly, I looked at the captains around me. *Wait, what? The fact that I went to Sutherland is supposed to be a secret— how do they know so much, and in such fine detail?*

The official reason for me not going to Sutherland was that I got sick, but somehow all the captains had a detailed understanding of what had actually happened. Maybe there was a leak...?

As I thought to myself, the anger of the captains began to steer in a weird direction.

“And why does Her Holiness have to be accompanied by *young knights*? She’d definitely enjoy looking at the muscles of a mature knight more!”

“Yeah, you said it! As the knight with the best abs, *I* should be the one joining her for a swim!”

Canopus calmly whispered into my ear: “Feel free to disregard what they say entirely. They’ve bulked up so hard that their muscles have driven the brains from their skulls.”

In the end, Wezen had to calm the enraged captains down.

“Have we all said our piece?” He scanned his eyes over everyone, not really giving anyone any room to say ‘no’. He then brought an end to things. “Very well then. The High Council shall do more to take Her Holiness’s wishes into account from now on before mobilizing her. If what they seek can be done by Sirius as well, then they will request his assistance instead. Does that sound fair?”

Everyone knew the last half was meaningless, but nobody dared object to the Commander, so it stood. With that, the topic came to an end.

After some closing words, the meeting was finished. I heard Wezen complain about Sirius then. “You always only force me to work when it’s convenient for you! Enough! I’m in my fifties already! Just let me retire!”

Come to think of it, it’s been almost ten years since Sirius stopped Commander Wezen from retiring. It’s been about exactly ten years since I met Sirius too... Wow, time just flies on by!

While Sirius was distracted by Wezen, I slipped out of the meeting room.

At night, I threw my weight onto my sofa, exhausted from the day. I somehow managed to continuously avoid Sirius since the meeting, but my nerves were still all frayed.

He definitely knows I was there in disguise! I’m in for a scolding if he finds me—or so I’d told myself as I hid from place to place, but the moment I sat down on the sofa in my room, all my exhaustion caught up with me.

As I lay there slumped, I felt my fatigue slowly clear, the moonlight pouring over me from the window. *A crescent moon...how lovely.* I gazed at the sickle-shaped moon, all the more beautiful against the dark sky, and felt the urge to go outside to get a better

look. I quietly sneaked out of my room (Well, sort of sneaked. Canopus—who stood watch right outside my door—obviously noticed and followed without a word) and went out to the castle courtyard.

I relished the soft touch of grass underneath my shoes, then slowly looked up at the moon. It was magical; it seemed to light up the very darkness of night itself. My decision to come outside had been right. The beauty of the moon was all that much clearer when seen directly.

A passing knight noticed me and called out. “What brings you out this evening, Lady Serafina?”

“Oh, I had the sudden urge to see the moon is all.”

“Huh?! O-o-oh, I see! W-well! The moon is beautiful tonight, isn’t it?!”

“Indeed, it is.”

As soon as I replied, the knight went red in the face for some reason.

Other knights passed by as I continued to moon-gaze, and they all commented on the moon in lieu of greetings.

“L-Lady Serafina! M-moon’s beautiful tonight, ain’t it?”

“My lady, ’tis a lovely moon this evening, is it not?”

I recognized a number of the knights coming up and talking to me were the captains from today’s meeting. As a group, four particular captains came and, in unison, said: “L-Lady Serafina, the moon is beautiful tonight, isn’t it?!”

I couldn’t help but smile upon seeing them greet me so politely, as though this were our first meeting. *What’d I tell you, Canopus? My disguise was perfect! Not a single one of them have any clue that I was that gray-haired knight.*

I tried to make my expression as neutral as possible and casually replied, “Hello, captains. The moon is, indeed, rather beautiful tonight.”

The captains were speechless for a moment, then devolved into a fit of hysterics.

“Aaaaah, did you hear that?! She recognized me! I’ve found heaven, and it’s *here*!”

“She recognized! Me! Thank you, Your Holiness, thank you!”

“I’m so happy to be alive! Thank goodness I changed uniforms this time! Now I can be near her without worrying about my smell!”

“The air is delicious, Your Holiness!”

Um...what do I do? They’re still weird, even when they’re talking to me while knowing I’m the Great Saint. Canopus was right about knights being peculiar. It’ll be a while before I can make sense of them...

Canopus, standing behind me, shooed the captains away with his hand like they were bugs. “It seems a few too many pests have been lured by the light. I’m sure you’re all busy—would you mind getting back to work, captains?”

I looked at Canopus, my jaw hanging open. Even for the one and only Blue Knight, that was no attitude to take toward captains.

I was certain they’d be angry at him, but instead they all said, “I can’t believe it! Her Holiness’s personal knight treated us like bugs! Ha ha ha ha ha! It’s an honor to be treated as pests!” They sounded happy as clams.

I looked at them, flummoxed, and thought, *I spend all day with knights from the Royal Red Shield, but I just can’t wrap my head around these captains from the brigades. I still have much to learn about people, it seems.* I slumped my shoulders, saddened. But I soon pepped up and thought, *I’ll just have to do my best to learn how to understand them!*

From behind me, Canopus murmured, “You’ve misunderstood *everything*. Please, don’t make things even more confusing for everyone...”

The next day I saw Sirius. To my surprise, he had no lecture or

scolding waiting for me. That put me on guard...he *had* to have known I disguised myself as a knight and infiltrated their meeting. Was he really just going to overlook it? There was no way he'd ever forget what happened, not with how sharp he was. If he was about to scold me, I'd rather he just got it over with...

"Is something the matter, Serafina?" he said, seeing me pout.

C'mon, he *definitely* knew what was on my mind! "There's something you'd like to say about yesterday's captains' meeting, right?" I grumbled. "Please, don't draw this out. Just scold me now."

The corners of his lips curved into a small smile. "You'd make a terrible negotiator. You shouldn't be so quick to admit you did something wrong. But it's all right. I'm in a good mood, so I'll overlook what occurred yesterday."

"Huh?! Wh-why?" This was a first. He'd never overlooked any of my past transgressions.

He grinned. "Because what I saw yesterday might just be a vision of a potential future. It'd be strange of me to lecture someone who has yet to exist, wouldn't it?"

"Huh?" I frowned, not understanding what he was getting at.

"There was this female knight I saw yesterday, you see. She looked just like you but with gray hair to go with her golden eyes. I couldn't help but think, if you had a daughter, is that what she'd look like?"

All at once, the maids in the room dropped the flower vases and glasses they were carrying.

"Huh?! A-are you all okay?" I called out, but they all simply blushed and avoided my gaze.

I've never seen my calm and collected maids so flustered before. Are they flustered because of what Sirius said? For once, I couldn't make sense of his words. Hmm, maybe he used some kind of knight lingo expression I don't know.

“I see, so that’s how you’re playing it...” I gave Sirius a challenging look, ready to decipher his meaning. *If my maids could figure it out, then I should be able to too!* I thought, then began to ponder his words.

Sirius waited for me the whole time, a contented look on his face all the while.

Side Story:
Red Ruby, Emperor of the Arteaga Empire
The Goddess Is Found?!

I WAS OUTSIDE in a wide, open area when the news reached me. After I scanned the document I'd been handed, I cried out: "What?! Fia's been found?!"

In my mind, the same thought ran on a loop—*I can't believe it! There's no way! Is this really happening?!*

Half a year ago, I met the Goddess—Fia. She had red hair and golden eyes, an appearance that resembled the legendary Great Saint (by the Náv Kingdom's teachings) and the Goddess of Creation (by the teachings of our Arteaga Empire). Through her supreme powers, my brothers and I were saved.

She granted us the strength to best a powerful monster in combat, removed the curses we'd been resigned to bear for life, and entrusted us with the Empire's future. I could only stand here now, as emperor, thanks to her grace. I was grateful to her and yearned for nothing more than to see her once more and thank her for everything. My Grand Chamberlain, however, claimed she met with us only to save our endangered imperial line, and that she would never manifest before us again. His logic was sound, I had to admit, but the three of us brothers couldn't accept such an end. So one of my younger brothers left for the Náv Kingdom with the commander of our Knight Brigades to look for Fia. It wasn't long before they reported clues leading to her. Later, another report came, this time from my other younger brother who had snuck along with the search. *Found Fia. Heading north to the Gazzar borderlands with her.*

"No fair..." I accidentally said aloud, pouting. "I want to go too..."

Our Knight Brigades' vice-commander, standing behind me, overheard me. His large frame shook violently, then he grabbed my shoulders with his massive hands. "Absolutely not! If you were to leave as well, it would be my head!"

Which might not be an exaggeration. With the first and second in line to the throne gone, the Empire would be in chaos if I were to leave as well. That being said...

"I understand where your concern comes from, but why can't I ever choose what I want to do?! Like now, for instance? Here I am standing at the entrance of a forest in some zany, hard-to-walk-in outfit! Why am I going for a forest trek covered in jewels, huh?! It doesn't add up!"

I was standing at the entrance of a forest while wearing my crown and the gaudy clothes I rarely wore even at the Imperial Castle. I was joined by a number of retainers and knights.

The vice-commander changed his strategy and smiled to appease me. "This is all for the ceremony, Your Majesty. It is absolutely imperative that you offer your prayers of gratitude to the sacred spirits of the forest. These ceremonial clothes are for that very purpose. Please, it's not as if you need to walk in them for long..."

I knew all that, of course. This forest was special. Many spirits once lived there long ago. Therefore, it was the duty of the emperor to personally undergo a ceremony here twice a year, as I was doing now. I wore the finest vestments I had and was accompanied by a few saints—saints, of course, famously once had the closest ties to the spirits—as part of our performance to show our respect to the ancient beings.

"Right. Because I won't be going far, even if I want to, huh?" I sighed. "I guess the trekking outfit I wear doesn't really matter."

The forest operated under some unknown power. Because of it, nobody could venture far inside. It took only a few steps in to lose all sense of direction, and if one walked for hours, they'd only find themselves traversing the same path over and over before ending up

back where they'd started. It was said that the spirits left the forest long ago, but their power still lingered on through some mysterious means.

With those thoughts in mind, I solemnly began the ceremony to honor the ancient spirits. Partway through, I had to enter the forest to “greet” them. I walked until my feet began to ache, then wound up where I had begun with everyone awaiting my return.

Although slightly disappointed, I was not surprised to see I had returned. It simply meant that I, as with many others, was not chosen by the spirits. It was said that those loved by the spirits were invited deeper into the forest, but none were known to have successfully entered, so there was no way of knowing if it was true.

Ancient ceremonies have many impractical, meaningless aspects. Trying to enter the forest must simply be another one of them, I told myself as I solemnly continued the ceremony. Near the end, I was handed a ceremonial short sword embedded with many large jewels. I took it silently and dragged it against my thumb, making a shallow cut. I stretched my injured hand straight forward and let a few drops of blood fall from my finger to the ground. “I—Red Ruby, Emperor of the Arteaga Empire—offer my blood to this earth. To the spirits who’ve protected this land since ancient times, I give my eternal gratitude.”

After a few moments, the saints stepped forward as planned and put their hands over my wound. “Spirits,” one intoned, “please accept this act of healing as our offering.”

The saints then chanted as one. “By the spirits’ name, let His Majesty’s wound be healed without a trace.”

My wound began to glow with a pale light as it healed before our eyes.

“His cut healed in mere seconds!”

“It’s...it’s a miracle!”

The nobles accompanying us clamored among themselves, but I

knew healing a small cut like this meant hardly anything at all...

I soon remembered my duty, however, and praised the saints for their work. "You all have such wonderful power."

If I had never met Fia, would I have been similarly awed by what these saints can do? But I could not appreciate this so-called miracle of theirs. Instead, I dimly stared at where my wound had been, my heart still. *Fia's healing was vastly different...*

"Please, Your Majesty," a whisper interrupted my thoughts, "try to appear a little more moved. You're supposed to be overawed by the power of the saints now." It was the vice-commander. Unfortunately, I didn't think I could do as he suggested.

I looked up and met his eyes. Still blank-faced, I murmured, "If I were to tell you I once lost my right arm, would you believe me?"

"Pardon?"

"My right arm. It was eaten by a monster from the elbow down. Would you believe me if I told you that a saint healed it in the blink of an eye?"

He looked at me for a moment as if unsure I was fully awake, but then saw my frown and reconsidered. With a light shake of his head, he thought it over. "Are you...referring to something that occurred half a year ago on the de-cursing ritual you and your brothers embarked on?"

"I am."

"I see. Normally, I would say it is impossible to heal a lost limb. However...I had once thought it impossible for your curse to be healed, yet here you are. Perhaps the Goddess of Creation could heal missing limbs as well."

"Yes, but...sometimes, I can't help but doubt myself—her healing was so perfect, leaving not even a scar. Might it not all have been a dream?"

I purposefully spoke as though in doubt, prompting my vice-

commander to go stiff-faced and admonish me. “No. Your Majesty undoubtedly met the Goddess. The blessings of the Goddess, like the powers of the saints, is not to be doubted.”

Indeed. Fia was the Goddess, without a doubt. That fact was not to be questioned.

“Yes, it is as you say,” I wholeheartedly agreed, awe plain in my voice. She had proved her greatness to me. There was no way she could not be the Goddess, nor could those events have been merely dreams.

I glanced up at the sky and thought of Fia who surely lay beyond it. I sent my heart out to her—our kindhearted Goddess, living in the Kingdom with powers beyond human imagination. Thinking of her whereabouts returned me to my senses with a start, however. My heart began to pound, and I felt restless. All at once, so restless! She was temporarily assuming human form, and as a human she would naturally err and get flustered just like before. Excitedly, I thought, *I could serve her, help her, assist her! I, who was saved by her, could repay the favor!*

“Agh, damn it!” Yet again, I cursed my lack of freedom as emperor.

Jealously, I dwelled upon my brothers who now accompanied her, then entrusted my wishes to them—*I cannot help her, so please do so in my stead*. Of course, I already knew they’d strive to grant her every wish, even without me asking, so there really wasn’t much point.

Agh, being emperor is so restricting! I thought a hundred times over, before finally comforting myself by imagining our long-awaited reunion. What would that bright, cheery, benevolent Goddess say when we met? What would I say in reply?

My vision of the future looped over and over in my mind. With a shocked face, she would see me and say, “Red! It’s been so long!” Then, with a smile, she would say, “Have you been well?”

Ultimately, reality would turn out many times greater than anything I could imagine, but that was a story for another time.

The reunion of the Emperor of the Arteaga Empire and the not-quite-Goddess turned ordinary knight was still far away...



Side Story:

Fia and Fabian Dine with the Captains

“**Y**OU NEED TO PUT ON some muscle, Fia! Let me make a special workout course, just for you.”

I looked wearily at Zackary, who was all smiles, and wondered how in the world things could have come to this. To his left, Kurtis and Quentin bickered. To his right, Desmond was complaining up a storm. The only good thing about this situation was the presence of Fabian next to me, both of us sitting across from the captains. He had been thrust into this situation against his will as well, but he showed no annoyance. No, he just smiled along with whatever the captains said like a champ. Honestly, his patience was inhuman.

But how did things come to this anyway?

I've been getting dinner with my trainee pals on the regular as of late, which meant Fabian and I often went to the cafeteria together. On one such visit, he half mused to himself, “Let's see...yesterday, Captain Kurtis came. The day before, it was him and Captain Desmond. I wonder which captains will come today?”

“Huh? Wait, do the captains really show up that frequently?” I traced my memory back and, sure enough, I couldn't recall a day when a captain *hadn't* shown up. “Wh-whoa, I guess they do! Oh, jeez. Captains don't normally eat with their subordinates, right? It kinda feels like there's some special treatment going on.”

“You're...only just now realizing that?” he said, eyes wide with surprise.

“Huh? What do you...hey! If you noticed, why didn't you say anything?!”

“I'm sorry, I should've. But personally, I don't mind their presence. You seem to enjoy talking to them, after all.”

There certainly was never a shortage of topics when the captains were present...but I *really* didn't like the idea of being given special treatment.

I let out a large, exaggerated sigh and gave Fabian a reproachful look. "Look...a guy like you leading a life in the limelight wouldn't get it, but some people in this world prefer to live on the down-low."

Fabian flashed an amused smile. "Heh heh. I'm sorry, but those words mean next to nothing coming from you." He moved farther into the cafeteria and tried to sit at an empty table.

"Hold it!" I quickly stopped him. *I've figured it out! The reason the captains keep sitting with us is because Fabian keeps choosing empty places!* I moved back to the crowded side of the cafeteria near the entrance and found two neighboring seats with no openings nearby. I sat in one of them. "It might be harder to talk side-by-side, but let's sit here for today."

"Ah! Your aim is plain as day, but I doubt things will go as you hope—not that they ever do. Actually, I'm pretty sure this will *completely* backfire on you..." He gave me a troubled look, but he sat with me regardless.

We had just begun to eat when—*thud!*—the knight sitting across from us had a heavy arm dropped across the top of his chair. The knight spun around in surprise to see Zackary, captain of the Sixth Knight Brigade, standing behind them.

"What's this? You're done already? I'm surprised you're fine with eating so little."

"*Eek!* C-Captain Zackary?! Y-yes, well, that's enough for me today! I have to go do some solo training after this, so I'm taking care not to overeat! I-I-In fact, I'm going to go do that training now! Feel free to have my seat!" The knight hurriedly stood up and left...even though I could swear they were just talking about needing seconds.

Yeah, they totally left because Captain Zackary threatened them...

I watched as Zackary filled the seat in front of me as though

nothing strange had just transpired. *You're a monster, Zackary. Have you no empathy for the hunger of a common knight?!*

Kurtis came along then and put a hand on the chair neighboring Zackary's. "I'll keep it brief: Would you be willing to give me your seat?"

"Please, take it!"

Wow, okay; so Captain Zackary was being nice about it. Captain Kurtis just straight-up said "gimme!"

As I sat there gaping at them, Desmond came along next and questioned the knight sitting in the other seat neighboring Zackary. "How badly do you want this seat?"

"Not at all, Sir!" The knight quickly got to his feet.

What?! Captain Desmond too?!

I then overheard Quentin talking to the knight next to Kurtis. "Sorry, but I want to sit near Miss Fia."

Hmm, he's gentler about it than the others, but that's still basically an order considering he's a captain!

The captains, once again sitting around me and Fabian, began to talk about this and that. I ate in silence for a while, but I couldn't bottle my grievances for long.

"Great, now it looks like *I* got those knights pushed out!" I whispered to Fabian. "This is all kinds of messed up! These captains shouldn't be eating with us! But I can't just tell them I don't want to eat with them anymore. You think maybe they'll get bored and start eating on their own soon?"

"Ha ha, you just worked out how strange this whole dining situation is, so I'd say you've made enough progress for one day. Regardless, it's rather unlikely they'll get bored and leave you alone anytime soon. The fact that they're using the cafeteria for ordinary knights shows just how infatuated they are with you."

That didn't exactly sound like a compliment. I was about to

protest, but then something he said hit me. “Wait, what? Is there someplace else they could eat?”

“Did you not know? The captains have their own exclusive dining room.”

“Wh-what?! That’s news to me! They must get all kinds of crazy luxurious foods there! Why would they bother to come *here*?”

“Like I said, it’s because you’re here. Your company means more to them than food, and that means a lot considering what gourmands some of the captains can be. I’d give up hope of getting rid of them anytime soon, if I were you.”

He grinned at me. In contrast, I had a look of despair. “Nooo!”

“Don’t worry, Fia. I’ll stay with you. Let’s get through this together.”

“Fabian...thank you...”

Only he could say such a thing even though he’d been dragged into this mess. What a charmer, I thought, with newfound admiration for my friend.

At the same time, in the captain-exclusive dining room, Cyril spoke to Enoch, who sat some distance away from him.

“It’s been quite barren here lately. I wonder why that is?”

As usual, Enoch didn’t reply.

And so, the two ate on in silence.

Afterword

HELLO, and thank you for buying this book!

Volume 5! It's hard to believe it was only just two years ago, give or take, that we released the first volume. But while two years may have passed for us, only half a year has actually passed in the story. In that short span of time, Fia has left her nest, become a knight, made new allies, and expanded her world. Just this volume, she met up with her sister and Zavilia, and also visited the Gazzar territory in the far north. With this, she's been to both the northern and southern (Sutherland) ends of the Náv Kingdom!

In this volume, Green and Blue are finally reunited with Fia. I was so happy for the brothers, I just had to get them on the cover illustration! I felt bad about Red being left out though, so I got him in on one of the monochrome illustrations. All the illustrations turned out wonderfully! Thank you so much, chibi-san!

We're doing some special things to celebrate this volume's release! Firstly, a promotional video was made! I had a hard time picking what character lines to showcase for the promotional video. Not only were there so many choices to choose from, but I couldn't decide if I wanted to go with one of the cool, serious lines or something silly! I was about as stumped as if someone were to ask me if I liked cats or my smartphone more. I spent days trying to decide! In the end, my editor had to choose for me. Please give the video a watch! Secondly, on our publisher Earth Star's homepage you'll find we're doing a character popularity contest! It ends May of 2021, so get your vote in before then. The character that takes first will have a short story featured for free on the homepage, so vote!

Incidentally, I'm writing this afterword in April, known for—you guessed it—April Fools'. Anyways, I got a phone call in the morning of April 1st that went: "Where you at?! You said you'd come swimming! Get your swimsuit on and get over here!"

I was dazed by the suddenness of it all for a moment but hurriedly replied, “What are you talking about? It’s April! Why would I say I’d go swimming in April?!”

They laughed and replied, “Ha ha ha, what are you so flustered for? I’m just April Fooling you!”

“Whah?! It’s A-April Fools’ Day? Wow, I can’t believe you’d think I’d fall for some dumb April Fools’ joke like that!”

I *did*, though. I fell for it, hook, line, and sinker. I was just trying to save what face I could. I vowed to myself then that I’d be the one doing the fooling next year for sure. But then I remembered—this time last year, *I had made the same exact vow...so, yeah*. It just goes to show that no matter how grand of a vow you make, it’s meaningless if you forget it. This time around, I vow to improve my memory.

I’d like to end things off by thanking everyone reading this book, as well as everyone involved in making this book a reality. Working on this volume was a blast yet again.



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